



Managing in the Face of Ambiguity and Uncertainty: The Problems of Interpretation and Coordination in Juvenile Justice Organizations

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**Managing in the Face of Ambiguity and Uncertainty:
The Problems of Interpretation and Coordination in Juvenile Justice Organizations**

Abstract

Drawing on field work at three different juvenile justice organizations, this dissertation explores the joint problems of interpretation and coordination in the face of problems marked by moral ambiguity and practical uncertainty. The author draws on array of research from a wide array of social and cognitive sciences to examine the relationship between knowledge and cognition, on the one hand, and coordination of action, on the other. Based on this work, the author proposes a more expansive, multidimensional model of cognition made up of four interconnected dimensions: conceptual, practical, emotional, and coordinating. This model allows us to better understand how people may coordinate their actions with others despite a lack of shared conceptual understanding of the problem at hand. The author then presents separate case studies of the three organizations, exploring these themes in further detail. In the case of the juvenile delinquent treatment center, Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth, the author examines how formal organizational processes and standards help coordinate the practices of the administration and clinical staff, on the one hand, and the teachers and child care workers, on the other, despite their fundamentally different understandings the boys' problems and how to deal with them. In the second case, on the sentencing process at a State's Department of Juvenile Justice, the author details how the formal, ritualized nature of the sentencing meetings allows for various professionals to express conflicting rationales for a given sentence simultaneously. In the third case, the author explores how the introduction of formalized practices, standards, and measures helps overcome the practical confusions, emotional conflicts, and differences in conceptual understanding between street workers and case managers that nearly derailed the

efforts of the pilot gang intervention program, StreetSafe Boston. Taken together, these three case studies suggest that the strength of an organization's formal bureaucratic features comes in part from the fact that they facilitate coordination without the need to resolve conflicts and contradictions in substantive interpretations, which may be a troubling but necessary accomplishment in the face of a problem rife with moral ambiguity and practical uncertainty.

Table of Contents

Dedication	p. vi
Acknowledgements	p. vii
Introduction	p. 1
Chapter One: Rethinking Organizational Cognition	p. 12
Chapter Two: Coordination without Consensus	p. 87
Chapter Three: Agreeing What to Do, But Not Why	p. 150
Chapter Four: Organizing StreetSafe	p. 203
Conclusion	p. 271
Appendix	p. 288
Works Cited	p. 290

For my girls—Brikena, AnnaSophia, and Julietta.

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Introduction

*The Sentencing of Troy Williams*¹

Troy Williams faced sentencing for a litany of charges: being a disorderly person; threatening; assault and battery; intimidation of a witness; possession of a Class D substance (marijuana); unarmed robbery; and armed robbery. In addition to these seven charges, Troy still had two pending trials—one for an unarmed robbery charge and one for an armed robbery charge. For some observers, this was not much of a surprise. Troy had been born into a family with multi-generational roots in one of the city's most active and violent street gangs. Troy appeared bent on making a name for himself. What is notable about Troy's case is that he had accomplished all of this by the age of thirteen.

Troy's short life had also been mired in emotional pain and trauma. The family that had brought him into the criminal lifestyle had voluntarily given up legal custody of the boy, essentially abandoning him to social services for the next six years of his life. He had already watched his older brother get shot and had witnessed at least one murder. Troy was also still very much a young boy. While locked up in the juvenile detention center, to get the attention of the staff, he got into the habit of mimicking the symptoms of mental illness that he saw the older boys exhibit. When confronted about his robberies, he laughed and dismissed them as “just playin’.” He was disruptive, prone to emotional outbursts and even violence. The detention center staff had to physically restrain him on multiple occasions in his brief month-long stay there. Moreover, he wanted nothing to do with therapy or treatment, openly antagonizing and threatening the clinical staff members.

¹ All names have been changed. Any identifying features have been removed.

Troy's case is somewhat extreme. Most of the young men and women involved in the juvenile justice system do not have criminal records as extensive as Troy's, especially at such a young age. Yet Troy's case exemplifies the real and consequential practical and moral dilemmas faced by professionals involved in the juvenile justice system. What does one do with a boy like Troy? Does one punish him for his crimes—crimes whose consequences and seriousness he doesn't seem to fully comprehend? Does one force him into therapy that he seems to need but doesn't want? Does one involve the family that abandoned him, or does one send him into a foster care system that yields questionable results at best?

On a cold winter afternoon, in a small recreation room off the main corridor of an urban juvenile detention center, ten professionals working for the Department of Juvenile Justice—social workers, administrators, educational specialists, clinical psychologists, and detention center staff—sat around a makeshift conference table. After a month-long assessment period in which they each gathered various kinds of information about Troy Williams, his crimes, his family, and his behavior, they held the official sentencing meeting. During the sentencing meeting, they were to discuss with the boy the details of his crimes, his family life, his treatment needs, his educational needs, and any other relevant behavioral issues before handing him an official sentence and placement for treatment. Instead, in an unusual turn of events, these professionals engaged in what was clearly a backstage discussion, wrestling with dilemmas posed by Troy's case, for almost an hour.

At issue was the fact that Troy's case did not fit well into any of the official options available to them. The State's sentencing guidelines recommended an eight to twelve-month sentence based on the most severe crime (in Troy's case, armed robbery). Moreover, Troy's abhorrent behavior at the detention center, his serious psychological issues, and his complete

resistance to therapeutic treatment all suggested that his sentence should be “deviated up” to the next level of the State’s sentencing guidelines. This meant that Troy could face up to twenty-four months in a secure, “locked down” facility. The staff members agreed that while a longer sentence might be fully justified according to these rules, it would amount to “burying the kid.” The perception was that Troy would most likely return to the state’s juvenile justice system before he became an adult, so giving him too long of a sentence up front might take the teeth out of any future sentences he might receive. On top of that, there was some concern that sending an impressionable thirteen-year-old boy to a secure, locked-down facility that housed mostly older boys would do nothing but help Troy become a better criminal. Still, something needed to be done.

Eventually, the lead administrator settled on a nine-month sentence, but deferred the placement decision until they could find out which of the more appropriate non-secure treatment facilities had “available beds,” or space for Troy. They finally brought the young man into the room to begin the official sentencing meeting. For the next two hours, everyone took his or her turn. They spoke to Troy about the details of his crimes, probing his thinking and motivation. They spoke to him about his gang involvement. They spoke to him about his drug use. They spoke to him about his schooling and educational needs. They spoke to him about his family. They spoke to him about his behavior at the detention center. They spoke to him about his emotional problems and therapeutic needs. At the end of the meeting, the lead administrator told him his sentence: nine months.

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In the sentencing of Troy Williams, we find at least two levels of thinking about his case. At one level, there is the thinking done by the individual professionals. As individuals, they are fully mired in the complexities and ambiguities of Troy's case. Their specialized roles certainly give them specific knowledge about Troy. Indeed, they are responsible for developing a particular interpretation of and perspective on the case—one that is not necessarily shared by the others. In important ways, the depth of their knowledge about the case does not necessarily help them figure out what the right thing to do is. If anything, it only makes them more cognizant of the ambiguity and uncertainty that they face, resulting in hesitation. At another level, there is the thinking about the case done by the organization. Despite whatever dilemmas and hesitations the case might pose, the organization's rules, official classifications, and formal procedures provide an official understanding and response to the case, ensuring that collective action on Troy's case moves forward. The individual professionals explicitly recognize that the official options available to them do not meet the demands of this troubling case, but they still proceed with the officially sanctioned courses of action. The ambiguities and uncertainties of the case are not necessarily resolved, but justice, at least in the form of a sentence, is still handed down.

Work at the nexus of social services and youth crime is fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty. Cases like that of Troy Williams often suggest competing, even contradictory interpretations of the problem as well as its solution. Moreover, it is hard to come up with clear evidence that any given course of action will succeed or fail. In the face of such a problem, from the point of view of individual level thinking, collective action presents a real puzzle. How do people act collectively toward solving some problem when they do not see the problem or the solution in the same way? How do people agree on a course of action when there isn't necessarily a clear or consistent way to evaluate such actions? If one thinks Troy deserves a

longer punishment in a locked, secure facility because of the severity of his crimes and his violent outbursts while locked up, and that he deserves a shorter sentence in a residential facility because of his therapeutic needs, how does one practically resolve between these two opposing perspectives?

Work at the nexus of social services and youth crime is thoroughly bureaucratized. The formal bureaucratic organization, composed of rules and regulations, formally defined roles and responsibilities, official categorizations, standards, and measures, standard operating procedures, formal processes, and paperwork, imposes a distinctively technical and formally rational logic on the problem at hand. While such organization and thinking may work well with technical or rational problems that can be broken down naturally into interlocking parts that can be reflected in the division of labor, this imposed logic seems rather ill-fitting for problems like youth crime and the broader set of social and psychological issues tackled by social services. Yet this ill-fitting form has become the predominant way to deal with such problems. The question is: why? At the organizational level, the problem is not collective action, but substantive epistemology, or cognitive rules-in-use. Why does Troy Williams receive a nine month sentence? It is for all of the reasons mentioned in the official sentencing meeting, and none of them, all at once. The individual professionals at the Department of Juvenile Justice encounter the formal demands of the organization as a social fact. They fill out all the paperwork, follow protocol, and go through the required procedures and processes because they must. The depth and breadth of knowledge among the many individuals, along with their experiences of ambiguity and uncertainty, are not and perhaps cannot be reflected in these formal operations. If an organization's formal features can compel individual and collective action forward without complete substantive engagement of the problem, what does this mean for the organization's capacity to deal with the problem?

Might these formal processes ensure action in the face of paralyzing ambiguity and uncertainty? Conversely, might these formal processes pave over key pieces of evidence, information, and interpretation?

Individual and organizational thinking are necessarily intertwined in practice. Individuals must interpret and enact the standards and rules of the organization. Organizations determine the division of labor, defining areas of specialization and determining day-to-day responsibilities and experiences of individuals. The sentencing of Troy Williams was not about strictly following rules. It was a struggle—a creative negotiation with the rules and officially available courses of action. The state’s sentencing guidelines acted as an anchor in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty. What does one do with a thirteen-year-old armed robber, budding gang member, and obviously psychologically troubled youth? Six months? Twelve months? Twenty-four months? Is there really a substantive answer to this problem? He must be sentenced, so why not nine months if six months seems like too little and twelve or twenty-four months seems like too much? One cannot simply make sense of the problem on one’s own. One does it with other trained professionals. But one also makes sense of the problem, with others, through the lens of the organization.

The Problem

The themes and questions that emerge from the sentencing of Troy Williams are at the heart of this work. How do people coordinate their actions when they lack a shared understanding of the problem at hand? How do formal organizations shape our thinking about a particular problem at hand? How do the demands of formal organizational rules and processes

shape capacity for collective action? What is the relationship between epistemology, or cognitive rules-in-use, and collective action?

This work is an exploration of the way formal organizations shape thinking and collective action. It consists of two major parts. The first part is a theoretical reimagining of the social nature of human cognition, particularly within the context of formal organizations. The second part consists of three separate case studies based on fieldwork at three very different organizations at the nexus of social services and youth crime. One is a one-hundred-twenty-year-old private, therapeutic residential facility with multiple dormitories, its own school, and its own clinical staff. One is a state agency responsible for the sentencing and treatment of all court-adjudicated juvenile delinquents. One is an experimental violence intervention and social service pilot program that targets active gang members in some of Boston's most violent neighborhoods with the hope of getting them to turn their lives around. Looking past their obvious differences in terms of size, scope, and jurisdiction, one finds two key similarities of interest: the epistemic conditions that the organizations face and the reliance on formal bureaucratic organization to work. Basically, each of these organizations operates under conditions in which developing a shared understanding of the problem is extremely difficult. These conditions bring into sharper relief the artificial and imposed nature of an organization's formal features, as well the role of those formal features in facilitating coordination without consensus.

This work belongs to the *Verstehen* or interpretive approach to sociological explanation. The first theoretical chapter stakes out the key concerns for the three empirical cases. I do not intend to compare and contrast these organizations directly. But I hope that the fact that there are shared threads through each of the vastly different sites provides greater support for my proposed theoretical interpretation.

Chapter One casts a wide net over the problems of cognition and knowledge in the context of formal organizations. I consider cognition the active process of knowing, apprehending, and thinking about the world around us. Knowledge, on the other hand, is the product of those processes; it may be stored in individual minds, consciously and unconsciously, but it can also be produced and stored within social, cultural, and technological processes and artifacts. Organizations make excellent sites for studying the social aspects of cognition and knowledge for several reasons. Organizations are sites for on-going communication, decision-making, and sense-making. Organizational rules, standards, forms, and processes crystallize thinking and knowledge about a given issue. Knowledge and thinking are arguably more explicit within organizations, making it more empirically accessible. Because of this, a wide array of research has cropped up around this juncture of organizations and cognition and knowledge. This includes not only work from organization studies, but sociology, anthropology, psychology, cognitive science, and science and technology studies. This has created a tangle of very different ideas about how we should think about the problems of knowledge and cognition, as well as their particular relationship to formal organization.

This theoretical chapter represents my attempt to make sense of this large mess and to propose my own model of cognition. Drawing on the literature on organizational cognition, in particular, as well as a wider array of research from sociology, anthropology, cognitive psychology, cognitive science, and science and technology studies, I show how both computational and interpretive models of individual and organizational cognition fail to adequately account for the problem of coordination of action. I then attempt to build a more expansive model of human cognition that incorporates practical, emotional, and coordinating dimensions in addition to the standard conceptual dimension typically assumed. This

multidimensional model of cognition allows us to better account for the coordination of action without relying exclusively on the need for shared understanding or consensus to drive collective action. With this model, we can better understand how organizations are able to *work* without a shared understanding of the problems at hand. While the formal features of an organization might seem like an epistemological narrowing (e.g. by imposing a formal rationality on a problem that resists such an interpretation), their greater strength might come from the fact that they tap into our cognitive capacity to put aside individual experiences and claims for the sake of social coordination.

Following this theoretical chapter are my three empirical cases. I lay them out in an order that helps make the case for the claims in my theoretical model. Given that each of these chapters varies in terms of analytic scope, I have ordered them to reflect the strength of evidence from each case for the proposed theoretical model.

Chapter Two presents the case of Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth, a one-hundred twenty-year-old juvenile delinquent treatment center located in Upstate New York. In many ways, the case of Berkshire Farm helps lay out both the practical and theoretical puzzles central to the dissertation. Drawing on a combination of archival and ethnographic work, as well participant observation, I explore how Berkshire Farm presents a problem for the framework of organizational cognition. The competing demands of therapy and control are realized in a division of labor that pits the psychotherapeutic understanding of the administrators and clinical staff against the practical demands of control faced by the frontline staff. Although this organization would appear to “think” about the problem of juvenile delinquency in contradictory ways, the two competing understandings seem to hold together in a state of permanent disagreement and mutual interdependence. The administrators and clinical staff possess the

interpretive framework consistent with the demands of bureaucratic authority—that is, the therapeutic ethos—and so are able to set the standards, rules, and formal expectations of the organization; however, the frontline staff must interpret and enforce those rules within demands of their actual practices. The formal demands of the organization do not necessarily exclude the alternative epistemological claims, but, instead, they sufficiently narrow the conditions of coordination.

Chapter Three covers the sentencing process at a state agency that I am calling the Department of Juvenile Justice. If the chapter on Berkshire Farm uses a rather broad scope to look at that organization, then this chapter on the Department of Juvenile Justice uses a much narrower scope to examine a particular process where people discuss competing interpretations of a problem around a table. Drawing on data from the observation of 33 different sentencing meetings at three different agency offices, I show how the various juvenile justice professionals in attendance regularly employ six distinct sentencing logics to talk about the cases. These distinct logics often suggest different, even contradictory, courses of action in the face of some set of facts. But rather than attempting to resolve the various logics in use and decide what the sentence is really about—that is, rather than develop a shared understanding of the problem—the juvenile justice professionals proceed with the sentencing process as if there are no substantive disagreements or contradictions among those logics. The sentence, justified according to these multiple logics, thus becomes more defensible against the claims made employing any particular logic. The formal process sustains a surface agreement among the participants that cues them to leave aside strong epistemological or moral claims in the interest of moving organizational action forward. They do not have to agree about what the sentence is about, but rather they just have to agree to do it.

Chapter Four covers the efforts of the experimental gang intervention pilot program, StreetSafe Boston. If the chapter on Berkshire Farm presents a broader analytic scope and the chapter on the Department of Juvenile Justice presents a rather narrow focus, then the chapter on StreetSafe provides both a broader sense of the organization's functioning, as well as those smaller interactional moments that constitute the organization's capacity to work. The story of StreetSafe begins as an organization largely unable to coordinate its various parts. Not only do the organization's members have distinct ideas about just what the key problem is, but they also develop practices that prevent them from working together effectively with any consistency. Moreover, there are clearly personal tensions that consistently become part of and disrupt the organization's official interactions. Eventually, after changes in both personnel and leadership, StreetSafe slowly begins to work as an organization. However, it works not because its members develop a shared understanding of the problem and its solution, but rather because they do a better job at coordinating their actions, aided in large part by the consistent adaptation of formal processes and standards. Organizing StreetSafe has less to do with clarifying the central substantive issues and more to do with formalizing coordination.

Taken together, I believe that these three cases present a compelling case for not only expanding our ideas about human cognition, but also for rethinking organizational cognition. Each of these organizations struggles, in a very real way, with the demands of ambiguous and uncertain epistemic conditions and the costs and benefits of relying on formal organizational features. The problems of epistemology and collective action are not simply philosophical issues. They are practical and moral dilemmas inherent to the work. This dissertation represents my attempt to draw these problems out into the light in a meaningful way.

Chapter One

Rethinking Organizational Cognition

Organizations are simultaneously arrangements of people and thinking—ideas, knowledge, skills, standards, procedures, expertise, and so on. Organizations must both cultivate specialized areas of expertise and coordinate the efforts of those specialists effectively. On the one hand, organizations embody established ways of thinking about a given issue; on the other hand, organizations innovate, adapt, and respond to the changing world around them. Organizations, thus, make ideal sites for the study of the social nature of cognition and knowledge. By cognition, I simply mean those active *processes* of apprehending, interpreting, and thinking about the world. By knowledge, I mean the product of such process; knowledge is a thing that can be stored in individual minds, consciously or unconsciously, or in social, cultural, or technical processes or artifacts. To this end, the social nature of cognition and knowledge is arguably more empirically accessible within formal organizations. Organizations are sites of on-going decision-making, communication, and sense-making. Organizations also encode knowledge and thinking in rules, procedures, standards, and processes. The highly structured and repeated interactions within organizations regularly push thinking and knowledge about the world, about whatever issue is at hand, to a degree of explicitness not seen in other parts of social life. Moreover, that thinking and knowledge is often difficult to disentangle from those structured, formal social relationships. Organizations are relatively contained, if exaggerated, microcosms of the social forces that shape human thinking and knowledge.

It is no surprise then that in recent years a growing body of research from a variety of disciplinary traditions has developed around the nexus of organizations, cognition, and knowledge. From the very practical concerns of running organizations in a “knowledge

economy” to the more theoretical concerns posed by scientific discovery in large, complex organizations, inquiries into the nature of knowledge or thinking in the context of organizations cover a wide range. This includes research from organizational studies, sociology, psychology, anthropology, cognitive science, and even science and technology studies. This is not a clearly defined field. Instead, this body of research is a tangle of ideas, perspectives, agendas, problems, and metaphors about organizational life, the human capacity for thought and action, and the nature of knowledge itself. In this chapter, I aim to cut through this Gordian knot and provide some semblance of clarity and coherence to problems of organizational knowledge and cognition.

This requires several steps. First, I will sketch out the three levels of analysis in which the theoretical concern about the social nature of knowledge and cognition have occurred. Next, I will examine the two prevailing schools of thought on organizational cognition—the information processing view and the interpretive view—at each of the three levels of analysis. While the interpretive view builds off the information processing view in important ways, it depends on a flawed model of collective action. To counter this, I will attempt to build a more expansive, multi-dimensional model of cognition that allows us to understand the many different ways people are able to attune their behavior and thinking to others without the presumably necessary need for a deeply shared understanding of the situation. Based on this broader understanding of cognition, I will then attempt to expand on the interpretive model of organizational cognition that pays greater attention to the role of interactional norms in shaping how collective understandings are formed.

What is Social about Knowledge and Cognition?

Considerations of the social nature of knowledge have roots in the very foundations of sociology and anthropology. Whether Marx's concern for ideology, Weber's emphasis on interpreting the "subjective meaning of social action" (1978: p. 20), or Durkheim's ideas about collective epistemologies (1995 [1912]), the idea that knowledge, and even thinking itself—traditionally thought of as under the purview of the individual—has distinctively social roots has become a central claim and central concern for a broad array of research agendas and traditions, including cultural anthropology, linguistics, the sociology of knowledge, and cultural sociology. Within such traditions, there is some variation in the strength of this claim—that is, there are some different understandings about what being "social" means for knowledge and cognition.

At the most basic level, most claims about the social nature of knowledge and cognition assume that the categories of thought and knowledge that individuals employ are the product of their social experiences. For example, the phenomenological tradition within sociology, including the work of Schutz (1944; 1967), as well as the more recent work by Zerubavel (1991; 1997), draws attention to the way socially-inherited categories of thought shape perceptions, reasoning, memory, and other cognitive processes. Similarly, much of the work in cognitive anthropology (Levi-Strauss 1966; Lakoff 1987; D'Andrade 1995) concerned itself with the structured patterns and categories of thought people use within and across cultures. While the cultural models or theories are typically the central unit of analysis in this line of research, methodologically this agenda relies heavily on individuals; that is, social categories of cognition and knowledge are accessible through the individual's articulation. The thinking or knowledge of an individual are still social in the sense that they are inherited from his or her social experience

and are necessary for him to navigate that social world. This is the *epistemological level* of theoretical framing—how do people know/think about their world?

At the next level, we might place those scholars who generally assume the first level of social knowledge and cognition, but who focus more on the demands of social coordination in shaping individual knowledge and cognition. In their description of how social institutions develop, Berger and Luckmann (1966) for example, emphasize that the way an individual comes to categorize his or her world is in part driven by a need to coordinate one's efforts with others; meanings are "agreed upon" by social actors. Douglas (1986) makes an even stronger claim about how social institutions not only shape individuals think about the world, but also simultaneously locate them within a set of social relations and obligations. Work with this understanding of the social nature of knowledge and cognition often (though not exclusively) focuses on social interactions—including communication, social processes, rituals, and so on—as the unit of analysis. We can find this emphasis in the symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), the work of Goffman (1961; 1963; 1967; 1974), and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Cicourel 1974; Latour and Woolgar 1986). The basic idea behind much of this research is that whatever thoughts or understandings an individual might have about world are invariably shaped by the demands of interacting with other individuals. Knowledge is a joint or collective effort. This means that all sorts of concerns about status, power, identity, and social relations get dragged into the production and dissemination of knowledge. Thinking about the world means, at some level, thinking about others. This is the *coordination level* of theoretical framing—how are knowledge and thinking about the world shaped by the demands of collective action? How are they the product of specific social interactions?

The last level in which the social nature of knowledge and cognition might be understood is the one with the most controversial history. Periodically, social scientists have been interested in the ways in which groups have a ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’ distinct from that of individuals—that is, how groups ‘think’ and how groups have knowledge that is greater than that of any one individual. Such an idea haunts Durkheim’s work, for example; his understandings of society and *conscience collective* have inspired sociologists and anthropologists alike. Many (e.g. Douglas 1986) have considered this understanding of societies or groups as having minds of their own to be sloppy anthropomorphic reification at best and quasi-mysticism at worst. The idea that “when a group of individuals is brought together, some kind of emergent collective knowledge structure is likely to exist” (Walsh 1995) has found traction across several disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Within organizational studies, Sandel and Stablein have argued that “organizations are mental entities capable of thought” (1987: p. 186). For example, anthropologist and cognitive scientist Hutchins (1991; 1995) addresses this idea in his study of distributed cognition in the navigation of a large naval vessel, a task so complex that it can only be accomplished by a group. In distributed cognition, no one individual, or subset of individuals, has the knowledge or cognitive capacity necessary to address the problem at hand; the coordinated knowledge/thinking of the whole group is required to solve the problem. Moreover, different groups can have different cognitive characteristics—that is, groups can know different things or think differently about a problem—depending on the structure and culture of the group. This is the *group level* of theoretical framing—how do groups, such as organizations, have knowledge/think in a way that is distinct from that of individuals as a result of their social organization?

There are several things worth pointing out about these three different levels of theoretical framing of the social nature of knowledge and cognition. First, it is clear that social scientists don't use the term "social" in a consistent manner, let alone more semantically-fraught terms like "knowledge" or "cognition." Second, there is the issue of supervenience among three different levels (epistemological, coordination, and group); considerations at the coordination level make assumptions (implicitly, if not explicitly) about what is going on at the epistemological level, and considerations at the group level make assumptions at the level of both coordination and epistemology. Conversely, claims at lower levels necessarily present important questions at higher levels. As we will see, any talk of organizational cognition, for example, makes strong assumptions about how people think or know things and how they are able to coordinate their actions. Finally, although these various levels of theoretical framing are applied to the broader issue of the social nature of knowledge and cognition, all three are relevant to the study of organizational knowledge and cognition. In many ways, organizations, as relatively circumscribed and self-contained systems of formal social relations, represented concentrated forms of the social forces that shape social knowledge and cognition.

In drawing attention to these three different levels of theoretical framing, my goal is to provide a simple map to order the often disparate projects that fall under the organizational knowledge and cognition umbrella. As we will see, many of these research projects do not speak directly to one another. However, in identifying which theoretical level the different projects address, we can see how they might be understood in relation to each other.

Thinking about Organizational Cognition

The sub-field identified as “organizational cognition” is a useful place to begin because it captures a revealing array of perspectives on the nature of knowledge and cognition. Walsh’s (1995) early review of this literature emphasizes the diversity of studies in this sub-field, especially in regard to their level analysis. Lant’s more recent review (2002; see also Lant and Shapira 2000), draws attention to the two very different theoretical trajectories within the organizational cognition literature—namely, those that treat organizational cognition as a matter of information-processing and those that treat organizational cognition as a matter of meaning-making and interpretation. Each of these theoretical trajectories conceptualizes knowledge in a different manner that in turn shapes the way they frame the problems of how knowledge is transmitted and exchanged among individuals and its consequences for the organization. In other words, there are key differences in the framing at the levels of epistemology, coordination, and group.

In highlighting some of the key ideas from these two different perspectives on organizational cognition, I hope to identify some of the key problems presented in thinking about knowledge and cognition in the context of organizations. Doing so will allow us to connect research not traditionally grouped under the organizational cognition umbrella and bring them into dialogue with each other.

The Information-Processing Perspective

The organizational cognition perspective generally traces its roots to the “Carnegie School,” which included the early work of Herbert Simon, Richard Cyert, and James March (Simon 1997 [1945]; March and Simon 1993 [1958]; Cyert and March 1992 [1964]). This

research puts the spotlight on managerial decision-making, paying particular attention to the cognitive and behavioral dimensions involved. Decisions by individuals took place within the context of a structured system of information flows (i.e., the organization); thus, individuals arranged throughout an organization do not all have access to the same information and they do not have unlimited choices when making any particular decision. As March and Simon (1993 [1958]) pointed out, the assumptions of rationality did not hold within organizational context. Instead, they argue organizational actors are operating under bounded rationality. Organizational actors act in a rational manner, given the constraints of limited information and limited choices; instead of optimizing their choice, they “satisfice” or settle for a choice that was “good enough” given their preferences and constraints.

These basic ideas laid the foundation for several lines of empirical research and theoretical work across several disciplines. On the one hand, research in economics and psychology explored in greater depth the predictable ways in which individuals violated the expectations of rationality. The experimental work of psychologists Kahneman and Tversky (see Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982; Kahneman 2011), for example, shows the ways people tended to violate the conditions of rationality in predictable manners under the conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty. Their extremely influential work led to the development of a new field, behavioral economics, a discipline concerned with the influence of social and cognitive influences on decision-making. Cognitive shortcuts, like heuristics and biases, and social/situational influences, like framing or anchoring, cause people to behave in ways that are inconsistent with the traditional rational actor model. A key insight from this research shows that people are “predictably irrational” (Ariely 2008).

On the other hand, research on organizations considered and modeled as information-processing systems. Some of the early research along these lines (Bonini 1963; Galbraith 1973), emphasizing the “system” nature of the information-processing problem, concerned with structure and design of the organization in term of its capacity for “scanning and search” for information (Lant 2002). In this research, the unit of analysis tended to be the organization itself—not necessarily the people within the organization. This research emphasized the importance of organizations being structured in a way that enables them to find and collect the correct information, as well as more information if needed. This kind of “system-level” thinking about organizations also comes out in the work of Thompson (1961). He argues that organizations could be closed, rationalized system of actions in the face of an understood, technical problem, or an open, responsive, “loosely-coupled” system (see also Orton and Weick 1990) of actions in the face of a complex and indeterminate problem. How the organization is structured directly affects just what and how much information gets to the right people.

What these seemingly disparate agendas share is a computational or information-processing view of cognition, the central theoretical framing in cognitive science (Lant 2002). Drawing heavily on analogies to computer-based information processing, the cognitive science view frames many of the capabilities and problems of cognition in terms of the structure and capacity of a system to process or compute information (Thagard 1996). That system may be an individual mind or it could be an organization. The idea is that even if human beings are flawed rational actors (i.e. they are not optimizers), their cognitive limitations and biases can be modeled in a relatively predictable manner. Moreover, with a few simplifying assumptions about the individual actor, an entire system of information-processing could be modeled. If we can think of the structure of an organization as representing the channels of information, decision-

making points, and more importantly, decision-makers were nodes in which information is processed imperfectly, but predictably. For example, Bendor's formal modeling of "muddling through" (1995) emphasizes the conservative tendency of organizational actors to hew closely to precedent in decision-making. Jones and Baumgartner (2005) elaborate on this gradualist model of decision-making, adding that exogenous shocks of crisis or controversy often forced apparently radical breaks from precedent. Even Hutchins' (1991) computer simulation of the influence of organizational structures and communication on "confirmation bias" at the collective level shows how much organizational behavior can be understood strictly in terms of information flows and processing. Such modeling, in theory, allows us to predict (with mild accuracy) organizational-level behavior in a given environment (i.e. there does not need to be as much emphasis on figuring out the details of specific instances of decision-making).

At this point, it is worth examining explicitly the assumptions this information-processing view of organizational cognition makes about knowledge and cognition, as well as how this plays out in terms of the three levels of social theoretical framing that I have identified. At the epistemological level, the information-processing view considers most knowledge in terms of *information*. Information typically denotes a discernible, meaningful feature (or features) of some object in the world (usually irrespective of its context). Such an understanding assumes an agent capable of apprehending the significance and relevance of such features, as well as objects whose complexity is reducible to such features (which can usually be measured, manipulated, and so on—that is processed). In other words, as Garfinkel (2008) pointed out in critique of information theory, the idea of information assumes the social and communicative order that produces information (that is, that makes information possible). The beliefs, preferences, and constraints (Gintis 2009) with which the agent comes to any decision are certainly inherited from

his or her social experience. Agents are always, already embedded in a world of discernible, meaningful information that they are processing.²

Related to the notion of information is the overwhelming focus on decision-making as the central cognitive-behavioral phenomena of interest. While there are obvious methodological reasons for this emphasis—i.e. decision-making is very easily studied, at least in the laboratory setting³—such a narrow scope of cognition may blind us from other modes of thinking and knowing that are constitutive of social life. In the decision-making epistemological framework, the thinking or knowing agent is decidedly passive. Information is out there in the world, but the agent only has interest in it insofar as he or she is making a decision (that is, the agent would be engaged in such activities as “scanning” or “searching” for the relevant information). Without a decision, the individual agent is inactive by default. We see an implicit critique of such an understanding of decision-making in March’s later work (March, Cohen, and Olsen 1972; March 1987; 1994) on the garbage can model of decision-making, where information and decision-making become loosely coupled and individual agents with solutions or problems are, by default, actively attempting to institute and structure meaningful ways to engage each other and the problems at hand. Moreover, as we will see, much of the work in the interpretive school of organizational cognition offers a much different understanding of what cognitive-behavioral phenomena are of central interest. However, the critical issue with the information-processing

² It is worth pointing out that such assumptions in modeling human cognition do not necessarily limit what aspects of human experience can be understood this way. Cognitive scientists rely on such models (e.g. Thagard 1996) to model not only choices, but perceptions, preferences, habits, non-conscious or unconscious cognition, and even emotions. The emphasis on decision-making explains why research on organizational cognition hews closer to variations on the rational choice model.

³ In the real world, the opposite may be true. Organizations often have an interest in obscuring how decisions get made.

model of epistemology is not necessarily its lack of realism,⁴ but the effects of those simplifying assumptions in thinking about the social aspects of knowledge and cognition.

To understand what I mean, let us examine the assumptions about knowledge and cognition at the level of coordination. Generally, research under the information-processing view of organizational cognition does not engage at this level in much depth (as it tends to focus at the individual or organizational level in its analysis) (see Grant 1996). Thompson (1967) does note different principles of coordination—rules, plans, or mutual adjustment—but associates them primarily with the kinds of interdependence groups within organizations have as a result of the kinds of technologies that they employ. Questions about the kinds of knowledge and thinking that go on under such conditions of coordination are largely a black box. It is usually assumed that the output of one individual or group becomes the input for another group or individual in an unproblematic way (diversity of knowledge or ideas in this view is thus easily coordinated). However, it does not take much to infer the models of communication and interaction assumed in the information-processing view of organizational cognition. In the information-processing view of organizational cognition, the key problem organizations face is what March (2001) calls “ignorance”—that is, the right information is not known, or there is not enough information. If we assume that the key epistemological issue is information, then the central problem in terms of coordination is assuring access to and communication of relevant information. Most work on organizational design, and even work modeling organizational level cognition (e.g. Hutchins 1991), understands effective communication primarily as a structural issue (and, at best, one whose variation can be modeled roughly). As long as there are formal channels of

⁴ Lack of realism is a typical critique lobbed against rational choice theory and other information-processing models. While it is certainly a valid concern at one level, it fails to appreciate the goal of such modeling, which is typically its power to predict human behavior under certain conditions. What I see as a bigger weakness is not the lack of realism, *per se*, but the fact that the simplifying assumptions cut off large swaths of interesting, complex, and practically and politically significant human behavior from analysis.

communication/information exchange established within an organization, then effective communication is assumed to be taking place; issues of interpretation get pushed aside.

Consistent with such simplifying assumptions is what Sperber and Wilson (1995) refer to as the “code model of communication.” In the code model of communication, some communicant has a message, which he, she, or it encodes and sends via a signal through some channel to a recipient, who in turn receives the signal, decodes it, and receives the message. This model makes strong, and perhaps questionable, assumptions about the clarity of the message/signal and about the ease of encoding and decoding of the message. Sperber and Wilson explain that this model assumes “mutual knowledge”—that is, for effective coding/decoding to take place “every item of contextual information used in interpreting an utterance must be known not only by the speaker and hearer, but mutually known” (1995: p. 18). Just as the epistemological emphasis on information ignores the complexity of the world and the subsequent problems in interpretation such complexity poses, so too does a simplified model of communication. The view of communication as information exchange flattens the problems of interpretation and inference that make communication—and social interaction in general—practically and theoretically problematic.

At the group level, the simplifying assumptions that treat knowledge as information and cognition as information-processing or decision-making prove useful in understanding why organizations with different structures often produce different results. Individuals act as cognitive nodes; their relationships with others in the organization —usually formal, though informal channels matter greatly as well—are the pathways along which information flows. At a very basic level, how those channels are arranged impacts how the organization as a whole processes all of the information that individual members possess. This is the issue that was at the

core of the early work in organizational design (e.g. Galbraith 1973). How an organization is designed affects how the organization, as a collective whole, thinks.

While the information-processing view of organizational cognition generally gives little attention to problem of interpretation at the levels of epistemology or coordination, it actually addresses the issue at the group level. As Lant points out, this was not always the case, but a combination of empirical and theoretical work in the late 1970s and 1980s “recognized that assessing and reacting to the organization’s environment was not an unambiguous process” (2002: p 346). The observation that organizations in the same organizational environment react in very different ways to the same external event (Meyer 1982) needed to be explained.

Daft and Weick (1984) argue that we can think of organizations as “interpretation systems”—that is, they are “open social systems that process information from the environment.” The organization’s interpretation is distinct from, or “something more than,” individual interpretations in that it is a result of established “cognitive systems and memories. Top managers attempt to systematically develop and coordinate groups or subsystems within the organization to know or interpret the environment, and different strategies result in different interpretations of the same environment” (Daft and Weick 1984: pp. 285-286). Daft and Weick (1984) say that organizations vary on two key dimensions: assumptions about the environment (is it analyzable or not?) and “intrusiveness” (i.e. how active or passive an organization is in seeking new information). An organization’s design or structure reflects whether its managers assume the correct or necessary information is out there in the world and how necessary it is to actively pursue that information.

This model of organizational interpretation is consistent with the assumptions about knowledge and cognition in the information-processing view at the levels of epistemology and

coordination. Because it is at the organizational level, this model frames interpretation as a problem of *ignorance*, rather than *ambiguity*, to use March's (2001) terms. More information, or the correct information, entering the organization's information channels leads to a better or more appropriate response to the vicissitudes of the environment. Although Daft and Weick (1984) bring in other models of thinking and knowledge to the discussion of their own theoretical model (which is no surprise given Weick's general theoretical orientation), the work it inspired (e.g. Jackson and Dutton 1988; Walsh 1988; Milliken 1990; Thomas, Clark, and Gioia 1993) "revolved around applying individual information processing characteristics that had been discovered in the areas of social psychology and cognitive psychology" (Lant 2002: p. 347). The general findings point to the fact that the environmental and organizational characteristics affect individuals', and thus the organizations', ability to identify, recognize, and interpret information.

Such findings, of course, echo the basic argument of March and Simon (1993 [1958]) that the organization and the complex environment that it engages places excess demand on the limited cognitive capacities of individuals, who respond in sub-optimal, but perhaps predictable ways. However, thinking about the problem of interpretation as a problem of information-processing strains the theoretical seams of this perspective. Sharing cognitive science's intellectual roots in systems theory, information theory, and even computer science, the information-processing view of organizational cognition inherits one of the same fundamental problems—namely, the "framing problem." The framing problem is "the puzzle of stating clearly and totally the overriding conditions, attitudes, or beliefs that globally constrain the decisions an intelligent system makes" (Frawley 1997: pp. 15-16; see also McCarthy 1980). No information-processing, no matter how well-designed, can take into account all of the beliefs, preferences, and constraints, as well as the relative orderings of those beliefs, preferences, and constraints.

Part of an intelligent system is being able to identify and delineate meaningful and relevant information in both the processing of information and search for new information. Basically, the information-processing perspective ignores, or puts aside, the problem of interpretation. The meaning of information, in this view, comes into the organization and into the hands of the decision-maker as self-evident. In the interpretative view of organizational cognition, however, defining what constitutes meaningful or relevant information is a central part of the “thinking” that an organization does.

The Interpretive Approach

As Lant suggests, the interpretive approach to organizational cognition “was not inconsistent with the information processing view” (2002: p. 351), sharing many of the same general assumptions about organizational-level cognition being distinct from individual-level thinking. The interpretive approach really branched off from the information-processing view, beginning with the work of Karl Weick focusing on the social psychology of organizations ([1969]1979). If the information-processing view focused primarily on what March called the problem of ignorance, then the interpretive approach focused primarily on the problem of ambiguity. The problem of ignorance has to do with whether or not an individual or an organization has the correct or necessary information. The problem of ambiguity has to do with the fact that the “evaluative bases of action” like identity, preferences, or even beliefs, “are typically neither clear, nor stable, nor exogenous” (March 2001: p. 63). In other words, what people (and thus organizations) know about a problem, how they think about it, and what their goals are in a given situation are not the steady, clear objects of analysis that practitioners and

scholars alike often assume them to be. In the interpretive view of organizational cognition, most of the cognitive work an organization has to do goes into dealing with such ambiguity.

Weick's decades-long oeuvre gives us several key concepts for understanding this interpretive view of organizational cognition; however, these concepts also break sharply from the information-processing view of knowledge as information and cognition as decision-making. The first key idea is the concept of *enactment*. For Weick, enactment consists of "isolating some portion of the flow of experience for closer attention" ([1969] 1979: p. 149). An organization's environment was an outcome of the organization's actions instead of something to which the organization was responding. So while the information-processing view argues that different organizations have different interpretations of the same environment due to the fact that they focus on different pieces of information, Weick argues that organizations have different interpretations because they enact different environments (Lant 2002). Rather than seeing people as decision-makers in need of more or better information, the concept of enactment sees the world as made up of an overwhelming amount of possible information and people as actively attempting to limit and define the range of their focus and efforts in the face of such a world.

Related to the notion of enactment are the concepts of *selection* and *retention*. Selection is tied into enactment, but distinct from it. Although enactment is not necessarily thoughtless (far from it), it is akin to acting for the sake of acting, including "operating without goals, misplacing personnel, operating a technology no one understands," and more. These kinds of actions "produce variable raw materials for selection to process" (Weick [1969] 1979: p. 185). In other words, selection involves organizational actors and organizations making sense of the results of their actions; in fact, Weick even refers to selection as "retrospective sensemaking," an idea he develops in later work (Weick [1969] 1979: p. 194). Retention is the next step in the process.

Once an organization has selected the key meanings of the situation it finds itself in, then it must decide which meanings, courses of actions, measures, and so on that it wishes to retain as part of its plan of action going forward.

Enaction, selection, and retention processes are always on-going within organizations. Organizations, using retained understandings, enact an environment, which is often in flux and in turn provides new “raw data” for the organization to select and make sense of, and possibly retain a new understanding of the problem at hand. These three on-going processes make up the backbone of what Weick calls *sensemaking*. In this notion of sensemaking, action is usually followed by beliefs or meaningful interpretations of those actions:

[B]ehavioral commitment is a stimulus to build cosmologies and coherent world views out of whatever resources are at hand. Whenever people act, their actions may become binding if those actions occur in context of high choice, high irreversibility, and high visibility. If action occurs under these conditions, the subsequent events may be enacted in the service of justification. Thus, justification can become an important source of social structure, culture, and norms. (Weick 2001: p. 7)

In other words, actions, especially highly public actions in a collective context, drive the formation of beliefs, goals, worldviews, and so on, rather than the other way around. We often do something and then we make sense of what happened. In providing *post hoc* rationalizations or justifications for our actions, we establish a set of beliefs or understandings about what we are doing, and thus lay the blueprint for public commitments and future actions. As Weick points out, “[o]rganizations are filled with committing conditions” (2001: p. 8)—that is, most organizational actions are highly visible and usually irreversible. As such, organizations are sites primed for ongoing sensemaking.

With sensemaking rather than decision-making, *per se*, as the prevailing metaphor for organizational cognition, the organization is not imagined as a system of nodes where

information is processed. Instead, placing the analytic focus on sensemaking draws attention to a variety of actions, individual and collective, where interpretation of events, raw data, information, and so on, is of primary concern. Individual actions such as noticing certain events or information, or labeling or classifying some problem are interpretive acts, but they are done in reference to social definitions established by the organization. Focus on language, talk, communication, symbols, and so on is central: “Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence” (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2009: p. 131). Interactions among individuals through formal and informal communication, meetings, and coordinated actions mean a collective or “shared” sense of the organization, the problem, the environment, and so on emerges (Taylor and Van Every 2001). And importantly, these coordinated actions mean that the knowledge of a problem “is not just located in the head” of the individuals: “Instead, the locus is systemwide and is realized in stronger or weaker coordination and information distribution among interdependent [individuals]” (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2009: p. 136). Sensemaking, as a concept, is intended to tie together multiple levels of action.

In examining the assumptions made about social knowledge and cognition at the three different levels—epistemological, coordination, and group—we get a much more complicated picture than that presented by the information-processing view. At the *epistemological* level, the interpretive view would, at first glance, seem to be consistent with a constructionist view of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Knowledge is not necessarily something out there in the world to be received by the individual actor. Instead, the individual is actively putting pieces of the world together. As the term “socially constructed” indicates, this process of imposing some understanding on the world out there is usually understood as the joint effort of people within a social context. We inherit categories and labels from our social context and learn to call

certain things, experiences, and practices by certain names recognizable—an idea as old as sociology and anthropology (see Durkheim [1912] 1995; Rawls 2004). Theorists and researchers may come to the table with different levels of constructionism (Hacking 2000)—that is, how free are actors able to impose a view on reality versus how much does objective reality resist such impositions—but generally the interpretive view of organizational cognition recognizes that constructed or imposed categories of making sense of the world, however well-established, do not necessarily contain the messy reality on which they are imposed. In fact, this inexact fit between categories and reality is what makes sensemaking an ongoing process; reality bubbles up from under an imposed understanding and must be made sense of (Weick 1995; 2001; 2009).

Most interpretive social scientific work adopts some variation of this understanding of knowledge. However, I want to suggest that Weick's conception of cognition pushes beyond the standard understandings of constructionism. If knowledge is something to be constructed, then cognition—that is, thinking—is not a passive process. Thinking is necessarily tied up with action. This comes out most clearly in the concept of enaction—in order to know what we are doing, we have to start doing something. The underlying assumption of such an epistemology is that the default state of human beings is action, not rest. In the information-processing view of the mind, by contrast, the mind is a decidedly passive receiver of information that is out there in there in the world. People wait until they have the right information, examine their preferences and constraints, perhaps scan or search for more information, decide, and then act. In organizational contexts, this would mean that the default is not action, but inaction. An epistemology that embraces a concept like enaction flips this understanding on its head. Noë (2006) makes an analogous argument about visual perception that might be helpful. Traditionally, we view the eye as a passive receptor of light and visual information. However,

the truth is, there is more information in our visual field than we could possibly process. Our eyes focus on particular aspects of our environment, while most of the visual field blurs to the periphery. In order to do this effectively and provide us with a sense of color, shape, motion, depth, and so on, our eyes are constantly moving in imperceptible (to ourselves) saccades. Noë suggests that we might be better served if we understand vision as more akin to our sense of touch. In order to feel something, we must move our hands and fingers around an object's surface. While perception might be thought of as a largely automatic cognitive process, it is not that difficult to make the leap to higher cognitive functions being linked to action if we think of knowledge about the world as something to be constructed by the mind. It is important to note that most constructivists do not consider such assumptions about action to be necessary to their understanding of epistemology, but this largely because the problem of action is generally left unexamined.

This particular interpretation of action and mind as being intertwined has its roots in American Pragmatism (though similar ideas were developed in parallel in some of phenomenological schools of philosophy, such as in the work of Merleau-Ponty). It is no accident that Weick regularly refers to James, Dewey, and Mead. At the heart of the Pragmatist tradition is the idea of purposive, non-teleological action: acting for the sake of acting, exploring or testing the environment without a strong sense of the results, etc. In tying action and thought together, this approach forces to examine how thinking unfolds in action, as well as how action is imbued with particular understandings and interpretations of some situation or problem. For example, Peirce's "doubt-belief theory of inquiry" (Peirce 1955; Flower and Murphey 2005), which lies at the heart of the Pragmatist epistemology, posits that most human activity is guided by habit—that is, an established pattern of action founded on an assumed understanding of the

world—until that habit is rendered ineffective by experience, at which point the individual must experiment and explore to establish both a new course of action and new understanding of the situation. Such an epistemological framework draws attention to the role of both unconscious (habit) as well as conscious (deliberation, experimentation) forms of cognition, but ties that cognition to acting in the world. Such cognition/action is at the foundation of non-monotonic reasoning processes, like Peirce’s notion of abduction, where individuals cycle back and forth between interpretation and facts, facts and interpretation. Such a model of cognition is social at the epistemological level in that not only are people’s categories for thinking about a given problem inherited from their social experiences, but their actions are constrained or enabled by their social positions as well.

For the interpretive view of organizational cognition, it is at the level of *coordination* where the social nature of knowledge and cognition points to the deepest theoretical tensions. At first glance, the idea of sensemaking posits a pretty straightforward interpretation of the problem of coordination. Organizational actors come together and construct a shared understanding of some situation, problem, etc. This is most often done in a retrospective manner, but once the group establishes a shared sense, that shared sense is supposed to inform future behavior, prospectively. For example, Langfield-Smith (1992) shows that over time, managers working together develop a “shared cognitive map” for understanding their work. This consensus view of collective action is a familiar trope within interpretive social sciences; cultures, shared ideas or beliefs, are often considered the very foundation of coordinated or collective social behavior. It is only when individuals believe or think about the situation in the same way can they act together. At face value, this seems like a relatively reasonable assumption. However, on closer

examination, the idea that actors must share the same understanding of a situation to coordinate their efforts quickly falls apart.

As Lant (2002) points out, within the interpretive organizational cognition research, some questions have emerged about the idea that organizational actors must have a “shared understanding” of the problem, the environment, the organization, and so on. In Weick’s early work, he points out: “a mutual equivalence structure can be built and sustained *without* people knowing the motives of another person, without people having to share goals” (1979: p. 100). Donnellon, Gray, and Bourgon (1986) find that within an organization there are often multiple understandings of the same course of action, and this does not necessarily impede the course of those actions. Even Weick and Roberts (2001) show that shared understandings of the situation are not necessary for the coordination of actors on an aircraft carrier. Fiol (1994) argues that such understandings of organizational consensus fail to capture an organization’s need for diverse points of view, as well as the fact that meaning occurs at multiple levels. What matters for organizational action is a shared framing of a problem rather than shared understanding of the content of the problem. Fiol’s conclusions have some obvious parallels to the symbolic importance of “myth and ceremony” within organizations that neo-institutionalists have emphasized (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Overall, this research points to the ambiguity of the phrasing “shared understanding” or “shared meaning” as a research agenda. What knowledge must be shared by the actors? Just how much understanding or meaning do the individual actors need to have in common to coordinate their efforts? These problems point away from what I would call the *deep consensus* model of coordination.

With that complicating view of coordination in mind, turning to the social nature of knowledge and cognition at *group* level for the interpretive view of organizational cognition is a

bit daunting. One's understanding of how interpretive cognition works at the group level hinges largely on how one thinks about the problem of coordination. If one takes a deep consensus view of sensemaking, then diversity of ideas and understandings and the need for consensus about the problem at hand would always be in tension with one another. A clear, widespread interpretation of a problem might increase efficiency and effectiveness (i.e. a closed, rational system), but it might not be responsive to important changes in the organizational environment (i.e. like an open, loosely coupled system). We can see the converse of this in Stark's notion of heterarchy (2009), where organizations are made up of multiple, competing logics of evaluation. He assumes that diversity of ideas or logics of evaluation by itself makes an organization more adaptive and responsive to its environment by giving the organization as a whole multiple interpretive lenses through which to view a problem. The idea that one can have either diversity and adaptiveness or consensus and efficiency seems a bit crude and inexact.

Generally, the interpretive view of organizational cognition favors the view that organizations are "open" and "loosely coupled" systems (Daft and Weick 1984; Weick 1976), as opposed to "closed, rational" systems (Thompson 1967). Such open, loosely coupled systems are purposefully made up of largely independently operating parts that focus on different aspects of an organization's complex, ever-changing environment. There is an open question of just how responsive those various organizational parts must be to one another. For some organizations (e.g. university), the independent parts (e.g. admissions and the Classics department) may be largely unresponsive to one another. For other organizations (e.g. a software company), the seemingly independent parts (e.g. development and marketing) might face regular, long-term coordination issues. A deep consensus model of sensemaking that places diversity and consensus in opposition essentially fails to provide an adequate theoretical foundation to account for either.

If we understand meaning as happening at multiple levels, as Fiol (1994) suggests, then we can begin to account for both how diverse organizations with little apparent need for coordination can somehow hold together, as well as how diverse organizations with clear need for coordination work. So, for example, in a diverse organization like a university, framing of organizational actions matters a lot; moreover, it might be preferable if the framing is sufficiently ambiguous and vague (Cohen and March 1986; Eisenberg 2006). For an organization with diverse parts (which is most organizations) but a strong need for coordination, such as an aircraft carrier (Weick and Roberts [1993] 2001), it is clear that a great amount of energy and attention goes into coordination without necessarily sacrificing the diverse array of technical expertise necessary for the organization as a whole to complete its task. Obviously, coordination and communication within any organization can break down, often with disastrous results (e.g. Perrow 1999), but diversity of understandings does not in itself preclude coordination. However, organizational needs for coordination may vary as well. We should thus think of diversity of understandings within an organization and need for coordination as separate dimensions of organizational cognition.

If we take the interpretive view of organizational cognition at the group level seriously, then we need to pay attention to both the independent understandings of the problems, issues, and the environment that emerge within an organization, as well as the dynamics of coordination that emerge from within that organization. Much of the work within this interpretive framework has focused on the ways in which individuals, groups, and organizations actively construct and interpret the world in which they operate, often conflating the knowledge and thinking about the world with problem of organizing. The organization's "thinking" about its environment, however, is not strictly the sum of individual or sub-group interpretations; the kind and quality of

coordination of those various perspectives matters as well. The information-processing view of organizational cognition generally assumes coordination occurs without a hitch. The interpretive view problematizes coordination, but does not necessarily provide us with the tools for thinking about how coordination matters to organizational cognition. In the next section, I hope to redress this situation.

Rethinking Cognition

In many ways, the interpretive view of organizational cognition represents an improvement over the information-processing view. It not only provides us with a more realistic view of the fuzzy nature of thinking that goes on in organizations, but it also expands the scope of our analytic attention to a wider variety of organizational activities and events where problems of thinking and knowledge are paramount. Organizational decision-making points may be important, but the activities and events that lead up to that decision-making point might be more reflective of how the organization “thinks” about the problem. However, if this move toward realism and expansion of scope has a cost, it is that thinking about how an organization thinks and knows becomes more muddled. Intuitive assumptions about the constructed nature of knowledge and the active nature of thinking present problems for the issue of coordination—do people need to share the same interpretation of a situation in order to act collectively? A problematic understanding of coordination in turn places organizational cognition at the group level on shaky ground—can we talk about how an organization thinks about a problem if parts of that organization (whether people or groups) think about the problem in fundamentally different ways?

Sensemaking conflates the processes of interpretation or knowledge construction with the problem of coordination, yet many have shown that shared understandings are not necessary for coordination to happen. This is not to say that the problem of coordination is not an interpretive problem. As Fiol (1994) points out, meaning is still central to coordinating people's efforts, but the meaning has to do with their collective efforts rather than the meaning of the problem itself. The issue is that by conflating the problems of interpretation and coordination we are losing analytic clarity and leverage.

In this section, I will present an alternative framework for cognition that not only separates out the problem of coordination from the problem of interpretation, but also articulates the different dimensions of social cognition and knowledge often assumed in interpretive work. After sketching out the multi-dimensional model of social cognition, I will examine how each dimension relates to the other, drawing on a wider array of research and theoretical work concerned about the problems of organizations, cognition, and knowledge. The idea is that insights from these distinct, yet related bodies of research will allow us to enrich the notion of organizational cognition.

Multiple Dimensions of Cognition

Moving beyond the research on organizational cognition, one quickly finds an array of conceptualizations of and concerns about the nature of knowledge and cognition that may be relevant to how organizations work. Some (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and von Krogh 2009; see also Polanyi 1966) have pointed to the “tacit dimension” of human knowledge—that is, knowledge about the world that often goes unexpressed—and the important role it plays in organizational

adaptation and innovation. Many (Zimmerman 1970; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Lave and Wenger 1991; Brown and Duguid 1991; 1998; 2001; Orr 1996; Huising and Silbey 2011) have also emphasized the role practices and practical routines play in bringing abstract knowledge to life. Ethnographic work on organizational cultures has also shown the role of socialization processes in shaping how people think about their work (Van Maanen 1976; 1991; Van Maanen and Barley 1984), as well as how normative pressures shape judgment and understanding of problems (Jackall 1988; Kunda 1992). These different lines of research have emphasized different aspects of knowledge and cognition within organizational life, even if they have not explicitly engaged with the notion of organizational cognition.

Moving even further afield into research concerned with the problem of cognition in general, we get an even more complicated picture of what constitutes knowledge and cognition. The rise of the dual-processing model within cognitive psychology (Haidt 2001; Evans 2008; Ariely 2008; Kahneman 2011) has dislodged the idea that the deliberative, rational part of the brain is where most of the cognitive work is going on. Instead, the fast, automatic (and evolutionarily prior) cognitive processes that happen at a largely unconscious level shape, drive, and compel our conscious, reasoning processes. This has opened our understanding of cognition to include things like emotion and embodied activity (Damasio 1994; Haidt 2001; 2012; Barrett 2006; Nöe 2006; 2009). In fact, Burton (2009) has gone as far as to argue that certainty of beliefs—an idea we typically associate with epistemology—is largely a feeling. Complementing this elevation of unconscious cognitive processes is a less flattering denigration of our conscious cognitive processes. Conscious, deliberative reasoning processes appear to be good at marshalling reasonable explanations for unconscious impulses (Gazzaniga 1985) and defending inconsistent, irrational or illogical beliefs (Mercier and Sperber 2011; Haidt 2012). Not only does

this burgeoning line of research expand our understanding of what constitutes cognition, but it also suggests that whatever flaws our thinking is prone to are deeply connected to our social nature. Our minds are cued up not just to make sense of the world around us, but to make sense of it as social beings. Our ability to reason—verbally, logically, rationally—is but a part of a more complicated cognitive system embedded in our activities, laden with emotions, and oriented toward the people around us.

Drawing on this more expansive understanding of cognition, I am proposing a framework that is not only consistent with the insightful research of cognitive psychology (and related fields, such as cognitive science, neuroscience, etc.), but also allows us to make more meaningful connections among the various lines of research concerned with organizations, knowledge, and cognition more broadly understood. This framework is made up of four interrelated dimensions of cognition: conceptual, practical, emotional, and coordinating (See Figure 1).

The *conceptual* dimension of cognition refers to those aspects of thinking understood primarily through language and logic. In many ways, conceptual thinking is the primary way people have traditionally understood cognition as explicit thinking. Conceptual thinking includes explicit reasoning, talk, categorizing, communication, and so on.

The *practical* dimension of cognition refers to those non-explicit aspects of cognition involved in day-to-day practices. This includes not only embodied actions, such as physical skills, but also established routines and practices, as well as technologies, which engage people's minds without the need for explicit, verbal deliberation.

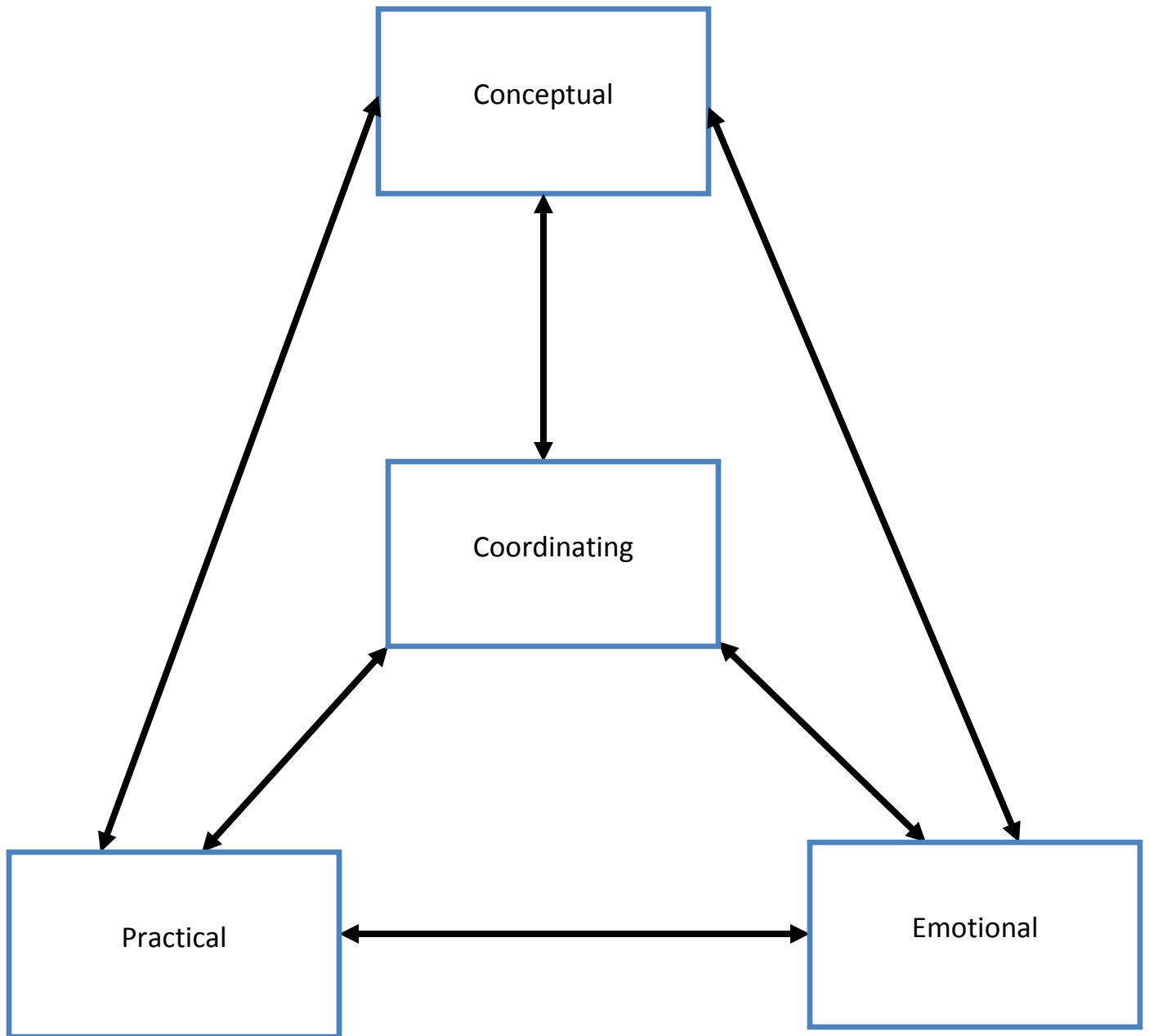
The *emotional* dimension of cognition refers to the emotive aspects of thinking, especially those connected to evaluation of a given situation. The emotions felt could be positive

or negative, and strong as well as weak (Barrett 2006), but the key is that they are involved in assessing and evaluating information of any kind, often at an unconscious level.

Finally, the *coordinating* dimension of cognition has to do with the ways in which a person attunes him or herself to others for the purposes of coordinating their activities. I choose the term “coordinating” over “social” to provide a narrower frame of focus than a broader, more ambiguous, and more widely used term like social. Coordinating thinking involves the conscious and unconscious mental efforts people make for successful social interactions—that is, work well enough so people can work together. This would include what Garfinkel called “ethnomethods” as well as the kinds of strategies and techniques Goffman detailed throughout his career (such as “surface agreement”).

In dividing cognition into these four dimensions, my intention is not to suggest that these are ontologically or even phenomenologically distinct. This is an analytic distinction meant to draw our attention not only to these particular aspects of cognition, but also their relationships with each other. I intend the framework to bring clarity where there has previously been confusion or conflation about different dimensions of thinking and to show connections that may have been previously ignored or underappreciated. In what follows, I will discuss the connections between each dimension, focusing on those connections that have already received much attention. As will quickly become apparent, these four dimensions are, to a large degree, well grounded in existing research. However, by considering these dimensions both in relation to each other, as well as to the framework as a whole, we can see how these oftentimes disparate research projects and theoretical agendas contribute to our understanding of the problem of organizational cognition.

Figure 1



Conceptual-Practical

Research from a variety of traditions, including sociology, organizational studies, science and technology studies, and even cognitive science, has examined the relationship between conceptual and practical knowledge and thinking. The distinction between conceptual and practical knowledge and thinking is intuitive. It is the difference between reading about how to ballroom dance—learning all of the terminology, looking at all the diagrams for each step, understanding the theory of the dance and its relation to music, etc.—and actually having to dance. Both kinds of activities involve knowledge and thinking, but of very different kinds. While I don't want to restrict practical knowledge and cognition strictly to physical activities, the active, in-the-moment nature of such activities does exemplify the distinctiveness of practical knowledge and thinking from purely conceptual work. In real life, many practices do draw on verbal expression and conceptual thinking; however, I would like to suggest that their location in activity, *in situ*, means that they are drawing on a kind of knowledge and thinking that is more practical-oriented than it is conceptual-oriented. However, for our current purposes, it is the movement back and forth between conceptual and practical knowledge and thinking that has drawn the most interest within the literature, especially when the distinction between the two is not as clear as it is in the ballroom dancing example. While the problem of coordination lingers in the background of many of these examples, that issue will be addressed in depth later.

Much of the research that has examined the conceptual-practical dimensions of knowledge and thinking has focused on the apparent inadequacy of rules and standardized methods in the face of the demands of actual practice. Early work in ethnomethodology, for example, drew attention to the “good organizational reasons for bad records” among doctors (Garfinkel 1967) as well as the flexibility in the application of particular rules among social

workers (Zimmerman 1970). The basic idea is that the official rules, processes, and paperwork required by the bureaucratic organization treat more complicated problems in ways that are overly mechanical and rational. Individuals, embedded in the demands of practical action and practical rationality, negotiate, compromise, reinterpret, and subvert officially defined categories of knowledge and understanding in order to get the work done. Orr's ethnographic work on Xerox repairmen (1996) demonstrates that even when dealing with highly technical tasks, detailed rules and protocols prove inadequate in the face of complicated and unexpected problems. Instead, these technicians relied on intuitions built up from years of practical experience. More recently, Huising and Silbey's (2011) work shows how the often limited and vague safety regulations for chemical laboratories must be interpreted through and negotiated with the day-to-day practices of scientists and laboratory technicians.

We find a similar focus on the tension between conceptual knowledge and practices in science and technology studies. Star (1985) shows that much of the uncertainty regarding the often inconsistent results of early experiments and laboratory practices was suppressed in the certainty and coherence of the theoretical and conceptual work in which the scientists were engaged. Latour's ethnomethodological approach (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Latour 1988) to the production of scientific knowledge even went as far to suggest that the carefully orchestrated practices of scientists determine what counts as official scientific knowledge. Rabinow's (1996) capturing of the discovery of the polymerase chain reaction demonstrates how scientific practices and technical and commercial applications play a role in providing clarity to ambiguous data and questionable conceptual intuitions. Knorr Cetina (1999) argues that the practices, embedded within high technologies and large-scale organizations, fundamentally change the scientist as an "epistemic subject"—that is, what the scientist knows or can know some part of the natural

world is shaped by the practical demands of working with these highly technical machines and working in a large, complex organization. While some have read this contrast between the often messy worlds in which scientific practices take place and the neatly packaged conceptual knowledge of scientific knowledge as revealing the compromised nature of scientific, I would suggest that it is more revealing of the dynamic relationship between conceptual and practical knowledge and cognition. Conceptual knowledge and thinking ties together disparate elements and results of practices; practices, in turn, flesh out the sketches of conceptual understandings, grounding them and breathing life into them.

Within the nexus of cognitive science, cognitive psychology, and cognitive anthropology, there developed a steady stream of research concerned with the role of practical activity in human thinking during the 1980s and 1990s. Research looking at “cognition in practice” (Rogoff and Lave 1984; Lave 1988) examined the way in which practical contexts, such as a supermarket, could dramatically improve individuals’ ability in seemingly conceptual cognitive tasks, such as mathematics. Similarly, Suchman’s work (1988) on “situated actions” emphasized the emergent quality of human user activity and thinking that ran headlong into the often overly abstracted and highly conceptual “plans” behind most computer software. The work of Hutchins (1980; 1995) also explores the ways in which culturally-embedded practices constitute the information-processing nature of human cognition. Frawley (1997) suggests that the Vygotskian notion of the mind as first socially constituted then individuated (Vygotsky 1978; see also Mead 1962) helps supplement the fundamental weakness of cognitive science’s computational model of the human mind—namely, the framing problem. All of this is to say that many working in and around cognitive science discovered importance of context and practical activity in priming and driving human cognition. Acting within a culturally-constituted, socially-situated context helps

people make inferences, distinctions, and connections in their thinking that abstracted conceptual model of thinking—with its reliance on often ambiguous informational cues—cannot.

Within organizational studies, a growing concern about the knowledge or information economy has drawn greater interest in the nature of organizational knowledge, especially when it comes to the problems of organizational innovation as well as translation of organizational skills and expertise across contexts. While some have attempted to locate the problem in the nature of knowledge itself—e.g. Nonaka’s focus on “tacit” versus “explicit” knowledge (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and von Grogh 2009) or Cook and Brown’s notion of “sticky” and “leaky” knowledge (1999)—Brown and Duguid (1991; 1998; 2001) argue that looking at organizational practices is key to understanding an organization’s knowledge. Established organizational practices and routines (see also Duhigg 2012) not only bring an organization’s rules, protocols, procedures, and established technical knowledge to fruition, but they also contain the often unexamined or unexpressed assumptions (i.e. tacit knowledge) about the nature of the work or problem at hand. An organization’s knowledge thus cannot be captured in a book or manual and passed onto another organization where it can be translated without a problem.

The fact that these very different lines of research have discovered the relationship between conceptual and practical knowledge despite radically different audiences and agendas is probably no accident. In his critical exegesis of Aristotle’s work, Dunne (1997) argues that one of the unfortunate inheritances of Western philosophy has been its emphasis on *techne*, technical or rational knowledge, at the cost of under-appreciating the role of *phronesis*, practical wisdom or judgment. Scott (1998) makes a similar point, locating the authority of the modern state in the domination of *techne* and *metis*, theoretical knowledge, over *praxis*, or local, practical knowledge. It is easy to see how the ancient Greek terms *techne* and *metis* align well with the

idea of conceptual knowledge or cognition and the terms *phronesis* and *praxis* align well with practical knowledge or cognition. Both Dunne's and Scott's critical agendas point to the apparent historical triumph of conceptual knowledge and cognition over practical knowledge and cognition, in Western philosophy and politics. Some (e.g. Weber 1978; Ellul 1967) read the rise of the bureaucratic organization within this kind of broader historical trajectory, seeing it as the inevitable conquest of *technique* or technical reasoning on almost human endeavors. Given this apparent philosophical and political bias toward conceptual knowledge and reasoning, it is easy to see why work across so many disciplines and research traditions has attempted to recover the importance of practical knowledge and cognition against an overly conceptual understandings of knowledge and cognition.

That being said, it is easy for the pendulum to swing too far the other way with researchers valorizing practical knowledge and thinking at the cost of discounting the significance of conceptual knowledge and thinking. Within my proposed theoretical framework, the relationship between the conceptual and practical dimensions of knowledge and cognition works both ways. Just as we might think of practices as constituting abstract conceptual knowledge and thinking, we might also think of conceptual work as bringing coherence to the cacophonous mess of various local understandings and practices. Putting aside the often implied criticism of such behavior, one can certainly find this point in the literature on standardization (Lampland and Star 2009) and commensuration (Espeland and Stevens 1998). Being able to pull together seemingly disparate elements into the same category or to be able to articulate the underlying logic or rationale for some set of practices certainly falls under the conceptual dimension of knowledge and cognition. However, as the diagram of my framework suggests, it is perhaps best that we think of these two dimensions—conceptual and practical—in terms of their

relation to one another; moreover, they are but two of four dimensions of knowledge and cognition. The two other dimensions that I have added—emotional and coordinating—are intended to build on and extend beyond the conceptual-practical dimensions of knowledge and cognition. My hope is that the broader framework will illuminate heretofore ignored aspects of the social nature of knowledge and cognition. To that end, I will address the emotional and coordinating dimensions in the next two sections.

Emotional-Practical and Emotional-Conceptual

The social sciences have generally had an inconsistent, if not tumultuous, relationship with emotions. On the one hand, social scientists of all stripes have recognized the centrality of emotions in a variety of individual and social behaviors, but have not fully integrated emotions into theoretical models of human behavior. Beginning with Durkheim, sociologists have returned again and again to examining the role of emotions in social life, in often insightful but limited ways. Commonly used terms across the social sciences, such as motivation, evaluation, preferences, attitudes, and so on, often have an emotive connotation, even if it is not explicitly acknowledged. On the other hand, emotions are notoriously difficult for individuals to report objectively and consistently, and for social scientists to define, categorize, and observe (see Barrett 2006). As a result, much of the work attempting to examine emotions within a social context often comes across as placing an emotional window dressing on otherwise standard social analysis. Both self-reports and observations of emotions have serious limitations. All of this is to say, the role of emotions within most social theoretical models is underdeveloped, but effective methods for observing or collecting data about emotions within social contexts is a daunting task.

Recognizing both the need and challenges of integrating emotions into a social theoretical model, I want to consider the emotional dimensions of knowledge and cognition. Specifically, I want to first do this by examining the relationship between emotions and the other two dimensions already considered—practical and conceptual. I will begin with the emotional-practical relationship as that is perhaps somewhat more intuitive. I will then address the emotional-conceptual relationship. While it is clearly difficult to completely separate out the social or coordinating aspects of concepts and practices involving emotions, I want to leave the problem of coordination in the background for now.

Being engaged in some kind of practice or activity usually has some kind of emotional valence. Some have emphasized the positive, emotionally satisfying nature of some kinds of practices. For example, Crawford (2009) argues that skilled, manual labor offers a unique kind of emotional and intellectual experience that has been undervalued in the information economy. The work of cognitive psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1991) shows that many people, such as athletes and performers, can get caught up in the seemingly automatic, almost unthinking, flow of an activity, which is clearly related to an experience of emotional satisfaction. Others have also explored the ways in which some kinds of work practices have a strong negative or constraining emotional valence. Roy's classic ethnographic work (1959) shows how workers managed the tedium of low-skilled, repetitive labor through joking, verbal games, and other distractions. Similarly, Jackall's ethnography of corporate managers (1988) reveals the amount of work managers put into emotional self-constraint and cultivated blandness in the presentation of self. Whether positive or negative, emotionally satisfying or constraining, our practical engagement with the world involves some kind of individual-level emotional reaction that colors what we think and how we evaluate the world around us. Conversely, the intensity of the

emotions, as well as the positive or negative tone of those emotions, can in turn influence and color our performance in some practical activity. We tend to think of practical activity and emotions as being embodied, so perhaps it is easier to see how these two dimensions of knowledge and cognition are intertwined.

In contrast, we generally think of the conceptual dimensions of knowledge and cognition as abstract and disembodied, so the relationship between the conceptual and emotional dimensions of knowledge and cognition might not be obvious. However, I would suggest that the connection is quite obvious within one particular aspect of human life—namely, morality. From Durkheim’s argument that the sacred and profane make up the fundamental categories of human epistemological ordering ([1912] 1995; Rawls 2004) to the more recent intuitionist approach to the psychology of morality (Haidt 2001; 2012), there is strong evidence that the often intense emotional reactions driving moralism—from disgust to righteousness—go hand-in-hand with our capacity for moral reasoning. This connection between our moral conceptual thinking and our moral emotional reactions works in both directions. Our moral intuitions motivate us to come up with acceptable rationales. Our moral arguments, which draw on established concepts, symbols, narratives, notions of causality, etc, are more often than not working for our passions, to paraphrase philosopher David Hume. Similarly, we can employ morally-charged language, symbols, narratives, and arguments to engage people’s emotions. The research on the sociology of narratives and accounts (Lyman and Scott 1989; Orbuch 1997) is one way to get at the conceptual-emotional relationship in justification and rationalization processes. Similarly, the research on framing (Goffman 1986; Benford and Snow 2000) is suggestive of one way to get at the conceptual-emotional relationship involved in motivation, as well as strategic manipulation. There are, of course, other aspects of the relationship between the emotional and conceptual

dimensions of knowledge and cognition besides morality, but perhaps none are more central to this relationship.

Emotions have often played the specter, looming in the background of our understanding of social behavior. Emotions, varying in intensity and tone, color our cognitive capacities, conscious and unconscious. Such an idea is both ancient wisdom and on the cutting edge of social scientific research. We have long understood the significance of emotions in human behavior, but we still struggle to deal with emotions empirically and theoretically in a systematic way. In identifying emotions as one of the four distinct dimensions of knowledge and cognition, my intention is to create a specific space within the framework to account for its role and connection to the other three dimensions. Our practical activity and conceptual schemata are necessarily tied up with our emotional capacities. Moreover, all three of these dimensions come into play with our capacity to coordinate our actions and understandings with other people. In the next section, the central role of the ability to coordinate our actions and its connections to the conceptual, practical, and emotional dimensions of knowledge and cognition will be explored. In adding this dimension, I hope to draw out the distinctiveness of all four dimensions, while at the same time demonstrating their profound interconnection.

Cognitive Dimension of Coordinating

In identifying coordinating as a distinct dimension of human knowledge and cognition, I want to point to the ways in which individuals' minds are necessarily oriented to those around them and how this is connected to the conceptual, practical, and emotional dimensions. First, I want to distinguish the coordinating dimension of knowledge and cognition from coordination itself. Coordination refers to the actions of individuals to work together. The coordinating

dimension of individual minds is the necessary cognitive foundation for coordination among individuals to take place. As Figure 1 indicates, this coordinating mental orientation occurs in relation to conceptual understanding (e.g. we share the same concepts and logic for thinking about a problem), practical activity (e.g. we are engaged in mutually coordinated actions), or emotional attunement (e.g. we engrossed in the collective effervescence of some situation).

In this section, I will first make the case that the coordinating dimension of knowledge and cognition should be treated as a distinction aspect of human thinking. Next I will explore how this coordinating dimension relates to the other three dimensions in the model. I will use the work of three different conceptual framings—Collins’s notion of interaction ritual chain, Lave and Wenger’s notion of communities of practice, and Weick’s notion of sensemaking—as exemplars for emphasizing particular dimensions of cognition in their relation to the problem coordinating. While each of these three frameworks is helpful in understanding multiple dimensions of cognition, each presents an incomplete picture. Finally, I present my full framework as a contrast.

What I am calling the coordinating dimension of human cognition might be best thought of as the social-orienting aspects of the human mind. This includes both conscious and deliberate elements, as well as unconscious and intuitive elements of thinking. Evidence from anthropology and neuroscience suggests that our brains are indeed hard-wired for the coordinating required in social life. Tomasello’s insightful research on primates and human children (1999) shows how human beings make a radical break from their primate cousins in terms of social cognition. During their development, human infants experience the “nine-month revolution” at which time infants demonstrate the capacity for joint attention—not only can they focus on an object that an adult has pointed out to them, but they also develop the ability to point out objects for the

purpose of focusing an adult's attention. This, in effect, suggests that infants have begun to develop a theory of mind, recognizing that others have minds and perspectives of their own; moreover, those other minds can be enlisted to work together on some joint problem. No other great ape has demonstrated such a capacity, at least in the same way. Other great apes, like chimpanzees, are certainly social in some sense of the word, but they have failed to demonstrate the theory of mind that human infants are capable of. Tomasello argues that this seemingly subtle cognitive distinction has led human beings to develop the capacity for culture.

Recent work in neuroscience also suggests that this orientation toward others is hardwired into our brains. In particular, the burgeoning body of research on "mirror neurons" (Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004; Lieberman 2007; Iacobini 2009) shows that areas of the brain that are usually active during a particular kind of activity also become active when an individual sees someone else engaged in that activity. Although there is some disagreement about just how central of a role mirror neurons play in various kinds of social behavior (Lieberman 2007: p. 271; Iacobini 2009), they may play some role in human capacity to imitate sensori-motor or embodied activity, nonverbal communication, and even empathy (Franks 2010: pp. 99-100). Research on mirror neurons may indeed have implications for thinking about the connection between the coordinating and practical dimensions of knowledge and cognition, as well as the connection between coordinating and emotional dimensions of knowledge and cognition. The point is not that mirror neurons are the only or even the main answer for understanding the social orientation of our brains, but that this research is suggestive of the deep and often unconscious ways in which our minds are attuned to people around us. By contrast, the connection between coordinating and conceptual dimensions—i.e. communication—has much more to do with our conscious and deliberate capacities for language and interpretation.

The claim that our minds are socially-oriented is, of course, nothing new. This is one of the fundamental claims of many theoretical claims in sociology, anthropology, and social psychology. What I want to suggest in making coordinating a distinct dimension of knowledge and cognition is that we need to consider the ways our minds are primed for sociality. The thinking that we have traditionally understood as going on in an individual's mind (or what I have called at the level of epistemology) is leaning or drifting toward others. To state it more strongly, following Mead and Vygotsky (two very different social theorists worlds apart) our individual experience of mind (that is, thinking, knowing, etc) is a product being social (Mead 1962; Vygotsky 1978). Mercier and Sperber (2011) in fact argue that we can only understand the systematic cognitive biases and failures in logic that people consistently demonstrate if we think of human reasoning not as oriented toward finding the truth, but toward making an argument, enlisting allies and supporters. The various systems within our brain—conscious and unconscious—are not geared to optimizing the performance of the isolated individual; rather, they serve a decidedly social being. Being social is not just a statement about the human organism, but a statement about the human mind.

Implicit in any social scientific work concerned with the problem of collective or coordinated action is some understanding of how individual minds can align well enough to work together. Different research frameworks have emphasized the role particular dimensions of cognition have played in driving or sustaining that coordination. The dimension that has traditionally received the most attention in its relationship to coordinating is the conceptual dimension of cognition. This is probably best exemplified in the standard consensus model of culture: individuals within a particular group/collective are able to work together because they draw on the same culturally established concepts, rules, mores, values, etc. Others, often in

reaction to this perhaps excessive emphasis on the role of conceptual knowledge and cognition, have argued that practices and emotions play a greater role in driving coordinated or collective action than has been traditionally appreciated. The theoretical frameworks that have focused on the role of different cognitive dimensions implicated in coordinating provide insightful, but incomplete pictures of the problem.

In what follows, I will highlight both the insights and shortcomings of three different exemplars, each representing the emphasis on one dimension: Collins for his emphasis on emotions, Lave and Wenger for their emphasis on practice, and Weick for his emphasis on conceptual understanding. In using these different theoretical frameworks as exemplars of particular dimension, I am running a bit roughshod over the nuances of their arguments. My point is not that Collins does not consider the role of practices or concepts, or Lave and Wenger do not include emotions, or that Weick does not look at practice—indeed they all do these things. My point is that their main conceptual contributions—interaction ritual chains, communities of practice, and sensemaking—frame the problem of coordinating with a particular dimension of cognition at the center. Each of these frameworks certainly demonstrates the importance for the dimension at its center in its relation to the problem of coordinating. But it is only when these dimensions are taken altogether do we have a stronger and more complete picture of cognition capable of helping us tackle the problems of coordination and group level cognition.

In his work *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Collins argues that social interactions are the fundamental social building blocks from which larger social structures are built (2004). This claim about the emergent nature of social structures in itself is not particularly radical; however, when taken in conjunction with Collins's particular conceptualization of social interaction, Collins's argument represents a sharp break from standard sociological understanding. Drawing

on Durkheim and Goffman, Collins emphasizes both the emotive and ritualized aspects of social interactions, using the term interaction ritual chains. These ritualized interactions may be formal, like a prescribed ceremony, or natural, that is, “without formally stereotyped procedures” (Collins 2004: p. 50). What is key is that these interaction draw in their participants in an emotional manner. The bodily co-presence, common action, mutual focus, and shared mood of an interaction ritual drive the collective effervescence, which sustains the emotional energy in the individuals as well as the solidarity of the group (Collins 2004: p. 48).

These structured interactions provide both a collective and emotional foundation on which the symbolic components necessary for society are built. Collins explains: “[W]e are constantly being socialized by our interactional experiences throughout our lives. But not in a unidirectional and homogenous way; it is intense interaction rituals that generate the most powerful emotional energy and the most vivid symbols and it is these that are internalized” (2004: p. 44). The interaction rituals and emotions created therein are primary; the interactions and emotions give symbols—that is concepts—their significance. Rawls (2004) makes a similar point about Durkheim’s work, though she focuses more on the epistemological argument implicated in this framework. For Collins, the interactions and the emotions are where the action is. For example, Collins contrasts his “Durkheimian IR approach” with ethnomethodology, arguing that ethnomethodology “is concerned with cognition and structure” (Collins uses ‘cognition’ in a very narrow sense of the term, referring to conscious, deliberative conceptual thought) while his approach is concerned “emotion and solidarity” (2004: p. 67). It is these emotionally-charged interaction rituals that provide individuals with the motivation—the emotional energy and a sense of belonging—to propel them from one situation to the next. Moreover, it is the emotions of these kinds of interactions which drive conflict and solidarity,

change and stasis. Collins goes so far as to argue that society can be understood as a marketplace for these kinds of emotional-charged encounters. These interaction ritual chains—as structured repetitions of successful, sustained interactions—are the micro-level behavior from which macro-level social structures emerge.

Putting aside these broader theoretical claims about the micro-macro link, at the heart of Collins's framework are claims about what makes collective behavior possible. Emotions are clearly central. When an individual interacts with others, the tenor of the interaction, its success or failure, hinges on how the interaction engages the emotions of the individuals involved. Feelings of solidarity, conflict, identity, significance, and so on, come from these interactions, which become self-sustaining. In other words, our emotional experience of the interaction compels us to seek out more such interactions. In placing such an emphasis on the role of emotions in driving collective behavior, Collins makes a convincing case that, at the very least, sociology has been overly conceptual (or 'cognitive' in Collins's terminology) in its understanding of both individual minds and in the problem of coordination.

There is clearly a strong connection in Collins's work between what I have called the emotional and coordinating dimensions of cognition. Interactions feed into emotional reactions; emotional reactions drive interactional behavior and choices. The practical dimension of cognition is certainly present as well, at least insofar as Collins is concerned with practices in the context of social interactions. The conceptual dimension of cognition also lingers in the background under the Durkheimian emphasis on symbols. However, Collins places interaction-driven emotions as casually prior to the conceptual and practical dimensions of cognition. Socially-embedded emotions are the bedrock on which practices and symbols are built.

From the perspective of my proposed framework, this goes a bit too far. Emotions may indeed play an important role in allowing individuals to coordinate their behavior, even in spite of conceptual or practical differences. However, they are not necessarily the sole or primary cognitive dimension engaged in coordination. This is an empirical question left to be explored in different contexts. Eliasoph and Lichterman's (2003) insightful paper on culture in interaction captures nicely why we should consider the role of emotions in coordination, but not on its own. They describe how one member of the environmentalist group repeatedly violated the group's established style of interaction:

A few times one member threatened the style of bonding in the group, by trying to convincing members to go in his own, more vocally radical direction. Other members met his harangues with long, awkward silence. They never criticized his own stance. But they never took him up on his proposal that they articulate their own moral or political viewpoints in ideological depth. *He had threatened the shared grounds of interaction*, trying to make ideological priorities a bigger part of group life instead of respecting members' privacy. He breached the group style. (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003: p. 753; emphasis in the original)

What is particularly interesting about this example is that this is a group of activists that Eliasoph and Lichterman are describing. One might mistakenly assume that a clearly articulated and strong position on the problem at hand (in this case local environmental concerns) might be how this group of individuals works together—that is, we might assume that there is a high degree of conceptually-based coordination going on. Instead what we find is that the group appears to want to avoid too much conceptual position-staking. There is an established emotional tonality to the group's dynamics that seems much more important to understanding how they work together, as well as why this more radical and verbose member of the group is effectively shunned for behavior that violates the established emotional tone.

What is key here is that one would be hard-pressed to say that this group is one built solely on collective effervescence. In some ways, this is what the radical member is looking for; he wants the group to engage in emotionally-charged moral and ideological discussions about environmental issues. From the perspective of the group, too much emotional excitement and too much ideological introspection risks undermining the dynamic that allows the group of diverse individuals to meet regularly and accomplish specific political goals within their community. Emotions are important in understanding how this group works together, but they do not appear to be the central motivator that Collins suggests they should be. Instead, the moderate emotional tone is an important part of the established group style—along with ideas about what are acceptable/taboo topics of discussion and what responsibilities group members bear toward each other as well as outsiders. Rather than thinking of emotions as the fundamental glue that binds individuals together in collective action, it is perhaps more fruitful to think of emotions as one possible component of an individual's cognitive experience that enables them to coordinate their actions with other members of a group. Moreover, as Eliasoph and Lichterman's example suggests, that emotional coordination is something that needs to be managed by the group in an active manner. The idea that a set of on-going interactions would have only one kind of emotional valence, which individuals would seek out, does not seem likely. In making emotions just one possible point of coordination, it is possible if the established shared emotional tone of a group is disrupted, then coordination that engages the practical or conceptual dimensions of individual's minds may work as well.

Like Collins, Lave and Wenger (1991) juxtapose their work against the standard, overly conceptual vision of knowledge and cognition. They are particularly interested in the social transmission of knowledge, but particularly when that knowledge is not easily condensed into

conceptual or verbal knowledge. They focus on what they call “communities of practice” in which the situated nature of practical knowledge and the participation within a socially defined group of practitioners are intertwined.⁵ That is, having the requisite knowledge to do some kind of work (whether skilled craftsmanship or even work within a bureaucratic organization) involves taking part in the recognized activities of practitioners. Lave and Wenger call this kind of learning “legitimate peripheral participation” in reference to the fact that newcomers begin on the outside of the group, and only gradually work their way to the central activities of the practice as they become accepted and proven members of that community (1991: pp. 34-43). Knowledge that is recognized as legitimate by members of a community of practice is not knowledge in abstract, but situated knowledge rooted in the nuances of actual practice. In this sense, practical activity and social coordination are intertwined.

While the notion of a community of practice is not explicitly a theory of collective action, it is a problem that is implicit in the kind of examples Lave and Wenger examine. How do people come to establish mutually recognizable ways of doing things, especially when they must work together? Wenger argues that the first step for a community of practice to cohere is “mutual engagement,” meaning that people are mutually oriented toward one another insofar as they are engaged in some practical activity (1999: pp. 73-74). This means not only showing competence in the activity, but competence in reading and orienting one’s efforts in relation to others. The next “characteristic of practice as a source of community cohere” that Wenger identifies is the

⁵ While I certainly could have drawn on Bourdieu’s work on the problem of practice, and in particular, its connection to his notion of *habitus*, I wanted to steer away from the term for several reasons. First, I think the term *habitus* does too many things within Bourdieu’s own social theory, as well as for those influenced by him. I want to avoid that excess baggage. Second, Bourdieu develops a much more dispositional theory of mind than I am comfortable embracing. My own bias is to favor a more situationalist understanding of cognition supported by decades of social psychological research (see Ross and Nisbett 2011)—that is, our situational context has a much greater influence on our thinking and action than some internal disposition that holds across contexts. Finally, I believe for my current purposes, Lave and Wenger’s work pay much more attention to the interactional and coordinating elements of practice than Bourdieu does.

“negotiated joint enterprise (1999: p. 77). He explains: “The enterprise is joint not in that everybody believes the same things or agrees with everything, but that it is communally negotiated” (Wenger 1999: p. 78). Coordination develops even among potentially antagonistic actors because of the practical demands of getting the work done, especially as these actors are to a large degree mutually accountable. Finally, Wenger notes that from this mutual engagement and joint enterprise is a “shared repertoire” of “activities, symbols, and artifacts” (1999: p. 82). What is important to note about Wenger’s use of the concept of repertoire is that it is fundamentally rooted in practice. It has a dual nature. On the one hand, this repertoire is “rehearsed” in the sense that it “reflects a history of mutual engagement” (1999: p. 83). On the other hand, the repertoire remains inherently ambiguous so that it can respond to new situations. This means that even a community’s established categories, procedures, rules, etc., only become clear within the context of on-going practices.

Placing practical activity at the center of collective action yields some important insights that the traditional emphasis on conceptual-level coordination overlooks. Having shared symbols and vocabularies matters, as traditional cultural consensus models of collective action have posited, but only insofar as they are rooted in actual practical activity. Such an assertion allows us to account for apparent consensus—“these people all talk alike, use the same words”—but also allows us to understand how word and deed might diverge and how there might be a greater variety of understandings of the problem at hand than a strictly conceptual focus might reveal. Similarly, if practice is where coordination is happening, then shared meanings might not be necessary. Diversity of understandings and even open antagonism can still exist within the context of a group that must still work together to get things done. The practice sustains the surface agreement. What matters most in practical coordination is mutual predictability (see

Weick 1979: p. 100): can I adjust my actions to fit with the actions of others, regardless of my opinion of those actions? Weick and Roberts ([1993] 2001), for example, describe the activity on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier as a series of overlapping practices. In such an environment, a shared understanding of the problem matters a lot less than merely heeding those whose practical activities overlap with one's own. Indeed, the organization of communities of practice can result in accomplishing technical achievements that outstrip established conceptual knowledge, as Mukerji's (2009) account of the construction of the Canal du Midi reveals.

While the relationship between conceptual knowledge and cognition and practical knowledge and cognition has long been fertile ground for social scientists, what the concept of community of practice helps draw special attention to is the way practice interacts with the problem of coordinating. It is not just that people are attempting to realize some socially agreed upon rule, category, standard, etc., in practice, but that they are adjusting their practical activity to those around them. A community of practice is not just a collection of assorted, independent individuals. A community of practice is a group of individuals mutually oriented to coordinating their practical activities. So, for example, how a social worker in juvenile justice organization decides to categorize a particular youth's case is not just about applying vague standards to a particular case at hand, but engaging in such a practice with some sense of how that categorization will be responded to by colleagues and peers within one's own organization, sister agencies, and so on. Garfinkel (1967: pp. 186-207) makes a very similar point in his essay on "'good' organizational reasons for 'bad' clinical records" among psychiatrists. Under some established category or concept, there is not just practical variation, but that practical variation generally drifts in the direction of the demands of coordination.

In fact, this “practical drift”—or “the slow steady uncoupling of local practice from written procedure” (Snook 2000: p. 24)—is very much a concern in the context of organizational mistakes and disasters. Snook shows how, at multiple levels, practices within the American military slowly moved away from the expectations of written rules and procedures, culminating in the accidental shooting down of an American Blackhawk helicopter by friendly fire. Similarly, Duhigg (2012: Chapter 6) gives a compelling account of how nurses at a Rhode Island hospital established a set of routines to deal with obnoxious and antagonistic doctors. Color-coding the doctors’ names on the floor assignment board, the nurses warned each other (and residents) about which doctors would respond negatively to any feedback from their subordinates. The nurses effectively established the practical norm of keeping silent in the presence of these doctors. Eventually, this established set of practices helped contribute to some very high profile medical errors (e.g. operating on the wrong side of a patient’s brain) before serious organizational changes were made. Cases such as these suggest that coordinating in terms of practical activity, by itself, is not necessarily a clear indicator of a functional organization (of course, one could make similar claims about coordinating along purely conceptual or emotional dimensions as well).

Lave and Wenger’s work certainly gives us reason to consider the role of practice in coordinating the minds and efforts of individuals. One can also see how the conceptual and emotional dimension of cognition fit in with their emphasis on the practical dimension. Communities of practice develop shared vocabularies, concepts, and habits of mind (i.e. repertoires); moreover, communities of practice can engage the emotional aspects of an individual in terms of identity (e.g. gaining satisfaction identifying with the community of practitioners) or even in terms of collective emotional experiences (e.g. the community-building

dimensions of a community of practice). As with Collins and emotions, Lave and Wenger, to some degree, make practice the foundation on which shared conceptual repertoires and emotional engagement are built. With my broader framework in mind, I do not want to say this is wrong. In fact, in important ways, when thinking about the kind of collective action involved in formal organizations, Lave and Wenger's understanding of communities of practice has much more traction than Collins's notion of interaction ritual chains. Bureaucratic rules and routines, to a large degree, ensure a great amount of stability and consistency in practice. However, I do want to suggest, as I did regarding Collins's framework, that practice is but one dimension among three on which coordinating can occur. Again, what dimension is central to any organization, or collective action more generally, is an empirical question.

Given that we have covered how the coordinating dimension of cognition related to both the emotional and practical dimensions, it is time to turn to the conceptual dimension. As I have already mentioned, the conceptual aspects of knowledge and cognition are probably the most familiar within the social sciences. Most work on culture and meaning understands the problem of coordinating in conceptual terms—people draw on the same language, understanding, values, worldview, and so on to understand and be understood by one another. One major reason for this is that the conceptual dimensions of knowledge and cognition are the most explicit, lending themselves to study in ways that the practical and emotional dimensions of cognition do not. Theoretical frameworks such as those proposed by Collins or Lave and Wenger are very much constructed in response to such a deeply entrenched theoretical and methodological bias. Of course, the goal of my own theoretical framework is not to abandon the conceptual dimension, but to put it in its proper place in relation to the other dimensions of knowledge and cognition.

Indeed, as part of my proposed framework, the conceptual dimension does have its own unique connection to the problem of coordinating.

Weick's concept of sensemaking is perhaps the best theoretical exemplar for understanding why conceptual work still matters in coordinating. To be fair to Weick's theoretical framework, it is not quite clear that Weick places the conceptual dimension of cognition at its center—although, importantly, Weick does settle on the term sensemaking. Weick's model, as I have already covered, begins with what he calls enaction, an idea that is probably more closely related to the practical dimension of cognition. People act in the world, often with unexpressed, implicit assumptions about the problem at hand. This action produces reactions and results that need to be understood. If such enaction occurs in the context of collective action(s)—such as it would in an organization—then there would seem to be some practical need to make some explicit sense of the reactions and results of these actions. This retrospective aspect of sensemaking serves both the individual need make the world coherent and the collective need to define some semblance of mutual coherence. In fact, if we believe the mind is not just oriented to social life, but a direct product of it (as suggested by Mead and Vygotsky), then these two needs—for individual and collective coherence—may indeed be intertwined. Deliberative, explicit articulation of just what is happening around us plays an important role in defining and solving problems for an individual, but in coordinating the efforts of multiple individuals to work together.

So far I have spent some time exploring how coordinating along either emotional or practical dimensions of cognition works and has its limits. Given that I have already explored the limits of Weick's notion of sensemaking—in particular, that often people do not need to share the same understanding in order to work together effectively—I want to draw attention to the

fact that in some situations the kind of coordinating through conceptual work implicit in sensemaking does indeed work.

In his discussion on the usefulness of “back of the envelope” algorithms, Kahneman details the interesting development of the Apgar score (2012: pp. 226-227). Kahneman explains that medical knowledge by the 1950s understood well how some newborn babies show different visible signs of distress, which if recognized and treated could save a baby’s life. The problem was that the various medical professionals in the delivery room—doctors, nurses, and midwives—were attending to different things at different times. As a result, many signs of distress were overlooked and many babies died. Realizing this problem anesthesiologist Virginia Apgar, over breakfast with a medical resident, came up with a checklist of five variables and suggested a rough scoring system of 0, 1, or 2 for each variable. Babies with a score of 8 or above could be considered doing fine, while babies with a score of 4 or below needed serious medical attention. The Apgar score is still in use to this day and is credited with saving countless lives (see Casey, McIntire, and Leveno 2001). There are two important things to notice about this example. First, the necessary knowledge about problem of newborn infant distress was already out there in the medical community. Second, existing practices were ineffective. The Apgar score represents an important kind of conceptual work that both makes sense of existing knowledge and thinking about the problem and directs practice. With the score in mind, not only did doctors, nurses, and midwives look at all the variables necessary to determine infant distress, but they began coordinating their attention and efforts to the same things. The Apgar score, as a concept, organizes knowledge and practices.

Whereas Collins places emotions at the center of social coordination and Lave and Wenger consider practice as foundational, Weick’s theoretical framework reminds us, in a more

nuanced way than the standard culture-as-consensus model, that ideas, concepts, narratives, and explanations can have an important influence on how people are able to work together. Weick's notion of sensemaking gives us leverage in thinking about how efforts to clarify problems conceptually can in turn organize people's practices. Beginning with enaction, or activity, as Weick suggests, does not necessarily mean beginning with coherent, well-coordinated practices. In many ways, the concept of enaction suggests people act for the sake of acting—action, not inaction, is our default state. Sensemaking provides clarity and coherence to actions and consequences that we find productive. In looking at an example like the adoption of the Apgar score in the delivery room, one cannot understand the coordinating efforts as resulting from practice itself (or emotions, for that matter). Weick (2009: pp. 30-44) provides a similar example in the case of child abuse. It was not until experts from different disciplines—doctors, social workers, radiologists—got together to label a problem once considered unthinkable that a series of formal practices developed to respond effectively to stop child abuse. While we have come to view the social construction of official knowledge as problematic (see Hacking 2000), these examples suggest the ways in which very real, very consequential problems only become recognized through the active construction of mutually recognized conceptual frameworks.

In fact, following Scott (1998), one could argue that one of the hallmarks of the rise of bureaucratic organization and authority in modernity is precisely its ability to provide a narrower conceptual scope, and thus sense, around which collective action is organized. Conceptual abstractions translate across contexts with much greater ease than practical or emotional coordination. Institutions, standards, rules, due process, and procedure—all of which represent the retention of certain socially established senses or understandings of a problem—may indeed only be brought to life in day-to-day practice, but their power comes from organizing thoughts,

actions, and actors in particular mutually recognizable directions. The rise of formal bureaucratic organizations as the prevailing mode of organizing to deal with political, social, economic, and practical problems represents a cognitive epoch as much as it does socio-political epoch. While the deployment of *techne*, technique, or technical knowledge onto all areas of human affairs is indeed problematic, as a long list of critics have argued, so much of modern human achievement across a variety of fields—science, engineering, politics, economics, social welfare, etc—would not be possible without it. Attempts to recover the role of emotions and practice in both cognition and coordination are important in providing a more complete and balanced picture of both individual minds and collective action; however, it would be foolish to let the pendulum swing too far away from the necessary attention the role of conceptual knowledge demands.

When taken in sequence, the theoretical frameworks of Collins, Lave and Wenger, and Weick suggest that my proposed multi-dimensional model of cognition is but a modest attempt to pull together several well-established perspectives on the related problems of human thinking and collective action. What I have labeled the conceptual, practical, and emotional dimensions of knowledge and cognition cover an array of human faculties engaged in acting and being in the world. Moreover, in identifying coordinating as a separate dimension connected to these other three I am pointing how these conceptual, practical, and emotional cognitive capacities are necessarily oriented toward social life. We are thinking, acting, and feeling not as isolated individuals, but as social beings. None of the three cognitive capacities—conceptual, practical, or emotional—is necessarily central to coordinating individual minds; all of them potentially are. In having a more expansive understanding of what cognition is, we will not be so limited in our understanding of the cognitive grounds that are constitutive of collective action. Sometimes collective action draws from the wellspring of collective feeling. Sometimes the practical activity

of many wordlessly establishes the routines necessary for effective action. Sometimes conceptual work brings clarity where there was confusion.

Rebuilding Organizational Cognition from the Ground Up

By articulating an enlarged vision of what constitutes knowledge and cognition, and how those multiple dimensions of knowledge and cognition are necessarily oriented to the demands of being social, my intention is to provide a more solid foundation on which we can address the problems of coordination and group level cognition. The information-processing view largely skirts the problems of coordination and group level coordination by working with a simplified model of knowledge and cognition. Knowledge is information; thinking is decision-making, even if it is flawed. Coordination is largely a matter of interpersonal information flows. Group-level cognition is a matter of the extent and organization of those individual information-processors. The interpretive view of organizational cognition offers a richer view of knowledge and cognition at the individual level, but runs into trouble at the level of coordination and group-level cognition. Thinking is intertwined with action; knowledge results in the interpretation of the buzzing confusion of the world. Coordination becomes a challenge as individuals, through their actions, literally know different worlds. Weick posits that individuals must develop a shared sense of a common problem to effectively coordinate their actions. Group-level cognition is the result of these arrangements of action and actively developed shared understandings. However, the reality of most organizations of any size and complexity is that developing a shared understanding of a problem is not only unfeasible, but counterproductive. Organizations depend on and leverage specialized knowledge and understanding. The puzzle of how these distinct understandings fit together still remains.

The various cognitive and brain sciences have produced evidence that cognitive activity generally drifts toward greater efficiency—that is, as we learn something new, we generally require less brain activity, and therefore use less energy, to engage in the same task. Generally, conscious, deliberative cognition—where most conceptual work resides—requires more energy than unconscious, automatic cognition. Following this claim, one would expect the cognitive demands of social coordination to follow suit. Explicit conceptual work, such as sensemaking, is cognitively and socially costly. Why make the effort to make sense of a situation in which coordination is already occurring in a way that works on the ground? Weick suggests that one would expect explicit sensemaking to occur mostly in moments of crisis, where an established sense or understanding behind one's actions has proven inadequate. This idea actually echoes the doubt-belief theory of inquiry underlying the Pragmatist epistemology originally outlined by Peirce (1955). Groups, like individuals, work in mostly routine or habitual manner, insofar as those habits and routines are adapted to the problem at hand.⁶ A lack of explicit shared sense is not fundamentally problematic as long as the coordination works at some level. It could be conceptual, practical, or emotional.

This is not intended as a normative statement—this is not how groups ought to operate necessarily—but rather a descriptive statement. The key problem is that we still need to account for how disparate understandings of a problem hold together in a group context without necessarily bringing the group's action to a grinding halt. Having a broader understanding of

⁶ Interestingly, Peirce, who first articulated this model of inquiry where individuals vacillate between habit and deliberation according to the demands of the environment, was attempting to develop a model of inquiry consistent with the adaptive logic behind evolution. Weick's own epistemological work sounds very similar, but he cites the source of his ideas about an evolutionary epistemology as being Donald Campbell (1965). The explanatory power of this adaptive epistemological logic—along with the growing body of evidence from the cognitive and brain sciences supporting it—is worth further exploration.

what constitutes human cognition and how it is necessarily oriented to the demands of coordinating allows us to move past the cultural consensus model.

If deep consensus is not possible, or at least not necessary, then what is the alternative model of coordination? Fiol (1994) argues that we need to think of meaning of the content of the problem as distinct from the meaning of the framing—that is, we need to separate out what people are talking about from how they are talking about it. This points us in the right direction. As Hutchins (1991) suggests, even in the simplest acts where two or more individuals must coordinate, there are at least two levels of cognition going on—cognition focused on the problem itself and cognition focused on the problem of coordination. While social constructionism often blurs the boundaries between epistemological problems (what people know about the world) and coordination problems (how people act together), there would seem to some analytic leverage gained in thinking about these problems separately (realizing, of course, that, practically speaking, they might often blur together).

The idea that a deep consensus is not necessary for successful coordination is not inconsistent with an interpretive view of organizational cognition. It just points to the fact that interpretive work done at the epistemological level might not be the same as the interpretive work being done at the level of coordination. We can find this alternative model of coordination in several places. Goffman's notion of "surface agreement," suggests that it is thin, even fragile, levels of agreement about the meaning of a situation that make most interactions possible:

Ordinarily the definitions of the situation projected by the several different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another so that open contradiction will not occur. I do not mean that there will be a consensus that arises when each individual expresses what he really feels and honestly agrees with the expressed feelings of the others present. This kind of harmony is an optimistic ideal and in any case not necessary for the smooth working of society. Rather each participant is expected to suppress his immediate

feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable. The maintenance of this surface agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service. (1959: p. 9)

Notice that a surface agreement doesn't preclude the possibility of disagreement or conflict among the actors; instead it sets a lower bar for understanding how "coordination without consensus" (Star 1993) is possible. Coordination, interaction, and communication do not demand that individuals bring to bear their full understanding (and feelings, thoughts, opinions, etc.) of a situation to work together. In fact, the norms of communication and interaction typically preclude such behavior. Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (1967) consistently shows how surprisingly little people communicate to each other in order to understand and coordinate with one another. Demanding clearer and more detailed explication of meaning, in fact, is generally considered a violation of communication norms.

Seligman, Weller, Puett, and Simon (1996) make a similar point about ritual behavior that has some relevance here. Rituals, they argue, occur in the subjunctive mood—that is, ritualized actions occur *as if* the actors involved agree on the meaning of those actions. Thus, mutual relevance—the way the situation is framed, the meaning of the surface agreement—becomes a level interpretive work separate from the demands of the problem individuals might be facing together. Dissensus at the epistemological level is possible, as long as there is a framework for consensus at the level of coordination of action.

Similarly, in their inferential model of communication, Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue that communication is largely about the "ostensive" (ethnomethodologists, following Garfinkel, might use the term "indexical") signaling of the relevant pieces of one's "shared cognitive environment." That is, while we implicitly recognize that there is a lot more going on in people's

heads, we generally make great efforts to stick to what is mutually relevant. This model stands in sharp contrast with the “code model of communication,” which understands individuals as transmitting information back and forth, encoding and decoding it. If we are only pointing to those features of our shared cognitive environment that are mutually relevant, we are relying heavily on each other’s inferential abilities. We depend on both some baseline social competence as well as context to cue one another about just what we are talking about. However, we also do not spend much time and energy ensuring that our meaning is understood explicitly or exactly, unless communicative reliability is important to the situation at hand (and even then, the communicated content may be minimal, such as in Weick’s aircraft carrier example). Moreover, the demands of inferential communication only engage a small amount of the possible knowledge and understanding the actors have of the world, the given situation, etc. For communication to work, much must be left unsaid.

Another key point is that in this inferential model of communication the line between successful and failed communication is blurred. Actors may infer enough to get along, to make things work, to act in a coordinated manner, but those inferences about the meaning of the situation need not match up one-to-one. The real difficult question becomes just how much distance among the myriad understandings is tolerable before the coordination begins to fail. The answer to this question may have less to do with the quality of the communication involved, and more to do with the coordination demands of the shared course of action. If we are employing the more expansive framework of cognition that I have suggested then we already have some sense of how coordination without deep, effective communication might happen. Established routines or emotional consonance may cue the individual’s coordinating capacities where one might presume to need explicit (conceptual) communication. If we think of our individual

cognitive capacities as more broadly engrossed in the demands of social activity, then we should expect coordination to occur in ways that are non-explicit, emotional, and entrenched in the ongoing buzz of institutionalized activity. Much might be left unsaid, but that does not mean that the individual minds are not thoroughly engaged in the demands of coordination.

Such a view of coordination suggests a way to understand or perhaps reinterpret some of the key observations coming out of the work on neo-institutionalism. At the heart of this work is a concern for the tools of formal rationality, or what might be called the strategies and architectures of coordination that organizations employ, such as rules, formal processes, procedures, standards, measures, categories of classification, paperwork, and so on. More importantly, there is a tendency to focus on the apparent irrationalities of such organizational practices. In one strong interpretation of this school of thought, organizations waste time going through processes and procedures that often have largely predetermined outcomes. Rules drive seemingly counterproductive decisions and behavior. Ill-fitting categories pave over the complexity of the phenomena that they are meant to capture.

The neo-institutional explanation is that such organizational behaviors have symbolic import. Within the context of society with culturally defined expectations of what constitutes formal bureaucratic organizations, this myth and ceremony of rational organizational forms and processes signal to interested parties that indeed this organization's actions are legitimate (Meyer and Rowan 1977). At a broad level, this explanation makes some sense, but as DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue, there might be practical reasons behind this kind of institutional isomorphism. The shared professionalization of managers, environmental uncertainty, and the normative demands made on organizations by the government and public could all pressure organizations to develop particular forms or processes. Organizational rationality, in this way,

becomes a kind of *lingua franca*, which organizational actors use to make their interests, intentions, and actions understandable, or at least recognizable, to other organizational actors as well as other interested outside parties. A more cognitive interpretation of this program (DiMaggio and Powell 1991) would be to suggest that many of these organizational forms and processes facilitate coordination among actors with potentially different and conflicting understandings of the problem at hand. The institutions of neo-institutionalism thus become ways of making sense of and ordering the social world as well as the social handling of knowledge (Douglas 1986). The organizational forms and processes are effectively instituted surface agreements meant to establish the expectations for coordination rather than the resolution of a substantive collective meaning.

Such a cognitive interpretation of institutions allows us to easily answer Friedland and Alford's (1991) call to "bring people back" into institutional analysis of organizations. Studying institutionalization and institutions within the organizational context means paying special attention to the way in which individuals actively participate in the construction and maintenance of these kinds of rational organizational forms and practices. Institutionalization and institutions are the processes by which people are able to *think together*. Organizational rationality, in its many institutionalized forms (due process, standard operating procedures, rule-based decisions, paperwork, universal standards, etc.), has the benefit of rendering the many actions and understandings of complex organizations as roughly identifiable and translatable across contexts. With my multi-dimensional model of cognition in mind, it is important to realize that while much of the meaning-related work might seem to be about the substance of the problem at hand, it often has as much to do, if not more to do, with the challenges of coordinating the myriad understandings within an organization, as well as across organizations. The oft-noted gap

between the details of a particular case and the standardized rules, the categories on the paperwork, or the logic of the rules points not just to the shortcomings of organizational thinking (in terms of the substance of the problem at hand), but also to the way in which organizations favor institutionalized *thinking* that responds better to the ongoing demands of coordinating in an often complex, ambiguous, and uncertain environment.

The net result of such organizational behavior is that the thinking individuals might do about a particular problem is invariably filtered through the publicly available processes, forms, standards, technologies, and procedures constructed to meet the organization's need to organize the collective knowledge and actions of many. Organizational actors must learn to translate their own understanding of a given problem into these prescribed ways of expressing or representing that particular understanding. At times, such translation work is deliberate, explicit, and perhaps even painful for the individual, but it also may eventually become a natural way of understanding and talking about the problems at hand. The key is that, either way, the demands of ongoing coordination shape the way individuals, and thus organizations, think about the problem at hand.

As recent work on standards and standardization suggests, these kinds of formal standards, categories, and even processes help “contain messy realities” (Star and Lampland 2009; see also Scott 1998), which may be necessary for coordination, but such standards, categories, and processes also privilege some pieces of information over others, some interpretations over others, and some kinds of understanding of the problem at hand over others. Ambivalence about such standardization, which is ubiquitous throughout modern organizational life, hinges on the fact that setting formal standards, categories, rules, processes, etc, allows for an organization's many moving parts to work together, while necessarily narrowing the epistemological and evaluative scope of the collective whole. What makes this especially

troubling is that what distinguishes formal organizations from other looser forms of collective behavior is the apparent rigidity, durability, and translatability of these coordinating elements. We get stuck with standards, categories, rules, procedures, and processes that we might all recognize as being imperfect, or even inappropriate, but, under the demands of authority or in the interest of getting things done, we learn to work with them. Moreover, in adjusting individual interpretations to the demands of standards, we often overlook the untold origins of standards, measures, categories, processes, or rules, which may have little, if anything, to do with the problem at hand (Star and Lampland 2009). In other words, such standards, measures, categories, processes, or rules may bear the marks of logics, interpretations, and practical considerations that have little or no bearing on the current problem, case, situation, etc. The very tools we use to get things done together shape the way we are able to think about and act on the problem at hand, individually and collectively, often in unforeseen and unexpected ways.

At one level, one can think of these formal features of organizational life as distilled expressions of social forces—social facts, in Durkheim’s sense—which the individual must learn to assent to, negotiate with, or challenge. The gap between the standards and the individual cases, or the rules and the details of practice, centers on the tension between what an individual knows and understands versus what he or she is able to make mutually recognizable. Formal standards, categories, rules, processes, and procedures tell us—often in a very explicit way—what pieces of our experience are going to be *officially* recognized as mutually relevant. They necessarily mute the richness of individual experience for the sake of collective action—that is, coordination. In this sense, formal standards, categories, rules, processes, and procedures are highly stable and durable, and often rigid and moveable, surface agreements.

At another level, one can think of these formal features of organizational life as constituting organizational cognition despite the potential cacophony of interpretations, evaluative frameworks, and epistemological claims present within an organization of any complexity. Standards, rules, and other formal features of bureaucratic organizations are certainly not neutral players in the understanding of any problem; however, they are also neither simply the monolithic, imposed, top-down interpretation (or consensus) of some authority. In arguing that formal features of organizations act as surface agreements, I am also suggesting that formal features necessarily fail to entirely quash the richer individual understandings and interpretations of a given problem even if they appear to fail to give voice to them. These formal features allow organizations to have coordination without consensus, as well as differences in understanding without innovation or creativity. Difference in itself neither undermines, nor necessarily reinvigorates the organization. What matters then is the grounds for the surface agreement—that is, how is coordination happening? Paying attention not only to the formal features of organizations but also how individuals work, negotiate, or struggle with those formal features matters. An organization's thinking about a problem is not simply the sum of its parts, but the product of how those parts work together. Put another way, an organization's thinking is not simply the organization's formal rationality, but the formal rationality (underlying those features such as rules, processes, standards, etc) as collectively interpreted (and reinterpreted) in the day-to-day actions of its members.

The formal features of an organization allow an important gap to exist between the myriad understandings of individual members and the demands of coordination. This gap is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this gap—the loose coupling between decision-making rules and practice, between the simplicity of categories and the complexity of a

given case, between the clarity of a public process and the ambiguity of private discussions, and so on—allow the organization to, in theory, leverage the depth and breadth of the knowledge and understanding of its many individual members. On the other hand, this gap is a perpetual threat to actually resolving the substance of any issue or problem at hand. If the gap between official explanations and unofficial understandings allows for the machinations of a complex organization to move forward, then it also allows the organization to move forward without due consideration of relevant evidence. This latter issue is a recurring theme in both literature on organizational learning (Levitt and March 1988; Argyris and Schon 1996; Pfeffer and Sutton 2000) and the literature on organizational disasters (Vaughan 1996; Perrow 1999; Snook 2000; Weick 2001). Organizations often make mistakes—sometimes catastrophic mistakes—not necessarily because some key piece of information was not available or that someone in the organization failed to make the correct assessment of the situation, but rather because that key piece of information or interpretation fails to trigger the proper organizational response. In a complex organization where there are surface agreements established by formal processes, procedures, rules, technologies, etc, there is also a wider and deeper pool of knowledge and understanding at the individual level that effectively gets treated as noise. Most of the time, it would seem, this is of little to no consequence for the organization. Of course, the danger is that some important signals get effectively mistaken for noise.

The thinking and logic behind some process, procedure, rule, category or even some piece of technology in use is necessarily thinner and simpler than the complex problem it is meant to deal with because those formal features are biased to the problem of coordinating action, not necessarily in-depth engagement of the problem itself. So while a particular rule or process might be in place in deference to some principle (e.g. due process, justice, fairness, etc.),

the rule or process themselves are no guarantees that the principle will be realized. A view of such formal features as kinds of surface agreements does not necessarily regard formalism as the opposite of substantive engagement in some problem; rather it suggests that any substantive engagement is necessarily limited and defined by the bounds of the surface agreement. Put strongly: there are only ever surface agreements when it comes to the social handling of knowledge. A surface agreement view of organizational formalism allows us to account for a wide spectrum of actual organizational treatment of knowledge, from the cynical manipulation of procedures, paperwork, and so on to effective problem-solving and genuine innovation. The expectations placed on organizational actors by the formal processes of the organization, as well as the practical, emotional, and conceptual dimensions of coordination involved in those processes, can either multiply or reduce the collective knowledge and understanding of the individual actors. Individuals working on a battleship (Hutchins 1996) or an aircraft carrier (Weick 2009) need not have a complete or shared understanding of how the complex whole works; effectively intertwined practices and a clearly defined tone of how individuals must interact allows the organizational whole to know more than any one individual. Moreover, such effective practices can allow the whole to be responsive to novel situations and problems (see also Mukerji 2009). Conversely, the need to get along and the surface agreements sustained by an organization's formal features may erode an organization's capacity to act on the collective knowledge of its members. Overly critical and condescending doctors, who change the way deferential nurses interact with them, can lead to serious medical errors (Duhigg 2012). The subtle shift in definitions and standards of safety (Vaughan 1996) or practices gradually drifting from the expectations of rules (Snook 2000) can lead to catastrophic failures.

Looking at these kinds of cases, the notion of surface agreement is an important variation on the idea of knowledge as socially constructed. Individuals in these cases—whether we are talking about organizational successes or failures—are not necessarily constructing mutually recognizable, fully-articulated definitions of some object out there in the world. Instead, they are constructing a mutually recognizable way to work together with their partial views of some object out there in the world. The norms, tone, or style of interaction go a long way in shaping how we collectively define, understand, and respond to the problems of the world. Some (e.g. Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Hutchins 1996) suggest that we might even think of a group's culture as primarily located in the course of such interactions—a view largely consistent with the popular management literature's treatment of the often nebulous term, organizational culture. Expectations of just how one should act toward other members of the group, how one should conduct oneself, and what one is allowed to bring into public discussion shape information, knowledge, interpretation, and understanding at the collective level. Such expectations necessarily bleed into one's conceptual, emotional, and practical understanding of any given situation. Interactions with other actors in the formal context of an organization defines what is relevant, what actions one must take, how much information is enough, what kinds of interpretations are acceptable, and so on.

If we think of these interactive norms as distinct from the epistemological demands of the situation or problem itself, then we can imagine some variation in how responsive organizations are to the situations or problems that they confront. At one end of the spectrum, there is the ideal organization whose formal procedures, rules, processes, technologies, and interactive norms hew closely to the real shape of the problem out there in the world. Generally, we would assume that the formal rationality of rules, processes, and procedures would map well onto relatively closed,

rational, and highly technical problems. The organization's division of labor would effectively reflect a natural set of interlocking divisions of the problem at hand (this is exactly the idea behind much of the research on organizational modularity⁷). In an ideal setting, information is clearly defined, measures and standards are well understood, and there is little room for interpretation. The information or knowledge that the formal processes pick up, that informs official judgment and decision-making, reflects an adequate depth and breadth of understanding of the situation or problem at hand. So, in essence, if individual organizational actors go along with the formal processes and rules, then their collective efforts will be effective. If some change or problem out there in the world develops, the organization will be able to respond to it quickly and effectively.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is the organization whose formal procedures, processes, technologies, and interactive norms are completely decoupled from the problem out there in world. Rather than technical or rational problems, this organization deals with messy, complex, and ambiguous problems that do not lend themselves to clear division of labor. Instead, the division of labor reflects distinct interpretations of the problem at hand. The formal rationality, rules, and processes of a bureaucratic organization are seemingly ill-fitting for such problems—e.g. the wide array of public and private human and social services. The information or knowledge that the formal processes pick up, that informs official judgment and decision-

⁷ A modular system is a complex system made up of many mostly independent subsystems. Each module has authority over specific kinds of tasks and responsibilities, but the modules have limited (and perhaps largely specified) connections with each other. Work in organizational studies has used the notion of modularity to explore the connection between product design and organizational design (Sanchez and Mahoney 1996; Schilling 2000; Brusoni and Prencipe 2001; Pil and Cohen 2006), as well as how modular organizational design relates to the problems of innovation, flexibility, and adaptability (Ethiraj and Levinthal 2004; Siggelkow and Rivkin 2005). Like much of the recent work on organizational knowledge, much of this work focuses on the practical demands of working in the fast-paced, high-tech information economy. Technological innovations demand intense specialization, as well as specified points of coordination not only within an organization, but potentially across organizations. Modularity, in this sense, is used as a way to conceptualize both the deep knowledge necessary to operate in such a technical world, as well as the potential flexibility and adaptability to deal with the ongoing demands of innovation and creativity.

making ,not only fails to adequately represent the situation or problem at hand, but it might be a mess of conflicting and contradictory interpretations that do not fit together in a clear or sensible way. Organizations at this end of the spectrum occupy worlds where clear evidence of success or failure of any particular action is nearly impossible to come by. The definition of the problem and its solution are far from settled. Exogenous pressures, the shifting politics within the organization, and the immediate importance of some apparent problem over others all hold greater sway in determining organizational action in such a situation. When the situation or problem fails to provide adequate or at least consistent evidentiary feedback to the organization's actions, the conceptual, practical, and emotional dimensions of coordination, in conjunction with the structures of the organization's formal features, substitute as feedback. In other words, if it is not clear at all if our actions are working or not, then we instead rely on social feedback to judge our performance—are we using words, concepts, and stories consistent with those around us? Do our efforts mesh well with the practical activity of others? Do we find an emotional resonance with those around us?

These two extremes—the epistemologically complete organization and the epistemologically empty organization—are ideal types, and most organizations fall somewhere between the two. This is not to say that all organizations face the same or similar circumstances when it comes to evidence, collective construction of a problem, and coordination. Organizations dealing with technical and rational problems are likely to be closer to the ideal of the epistemologically complete organization, but as a large body of ethnographic work in such organizations suggests (e.g. Kunda 1992; Orr 1996; Knorr-Cetina 1999; Carlile 2002), they are still a good distance from it. These organizations still struggle with the gap between the formal rules, processes, technologies, and procedures and the demands of actual practice. Organizations

that are closer to the ideal of the epistemologically empty organization—such as organizations dealing in the morally and epistemologically ambiguous worlds of human and social services—are deserving of particular attention because they help bring into sharper relief the way social feedback, channeled through the formal rules, processes, technologies, and procedures, give shape to the organization’s collective thinking about the problem. Such organizations confront a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty about the success or failure of any particular action or the correctness of any particular interpretation of the problem and its solution. The ability to coordinate without a clear definition or resolution of the problem, especially as the organization’s formal features give shape to that coordination, takes on particular salience.

In making room for more complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty—more epistemological and moral messiness—out there in the world, we redefine what constitutes organizational cognition. The idea that organizations are information processing systems has some sense, but it assumes a higher degree of clarity and agreement about what constitutes collectively recognized knowledge and understanding of the world. The interpretive view of organizational cognition makes significant room for the problems of ambiguity and uncertainty, but relies on an unsubstantiated view of consensus-driven collective action. What I argue for is a model of organizational cognition in which the “organizational mind” tolerates a lot more contradiction and inconsistency among its many parts. A richer understanding of the way individuals engage in the process of social coordination allows to better understand why collective action does not grind to a halt when there is a lack of consensus about the meaning of the shared situation. Organizations, as sites of highly structured, ongoing collective action, help us better understand the way collectives can work together without consensus. Organizations are made up of a cacophony of interpretations and understandings—they are “loosely coupled systems” (Weick

1976; Daft and Weick 1984), or “garbage cans” (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972; March 1994). Given this, organizational cognition is as much about ongoing problem “organizing” the myriad efforts and understandings of individual actors (see Weick [1969] 1979; Czarniawska 2008) as it is about the thinking about the problem itself. An organization’s formal features, as surface agreements, provide an externally available sense of structure to both the relationships among individual actors and in turn the collective “thinking” about the problem or situation. Organizational cognition coheres not necessarily in substance of the collective understanding, but in the coordination among individual actors.

At its best, this capacity for coordination facilitates an accurate and responsive understanding of the problem the organization faces. At its worst, this capacity for coordination sustains a deluded and unresponsive understanding of the problem the organization faces. Organizational cognition is not simply a matter of information or interpretation; it is a matter of understanding the grounds on which an organization’s many parts come to work together.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to do here is to expand our understanding of the nature of organizational cognition. To do this, I began with an inquiry into the social nature of knowledge and cognition. I argued that the social scientific work on knowledge and cognition considers these problems at three levels: epistemology, coordination, and collective. Using these three levels of understanding of knowledge and cognition, I then examined the two prevailing schools of thought on organizational cognition: the information processing and interpretive views. While sympathetic to the interpretive view of organizational cognition, I argued that it ran into a serious

problem—namely, that consensus was necessary for collective action—due in large part to its assumptions about the nature of human cognition.

I then offered a multi-dimensional model of human cognition to help us better account for the capacity to coordinate without consensus. I argued that human cognition involves four interrelated dimensions: conceptual, practical, emotional, and coordinating. Traditionally, the social sciences have focused on the conceptual dimensions of cognition and their particular role in social coordination. Using existing theoretical work, I try to show that a much broader array of individual cognitive capacities are drawn into the demands of coordination.

With this new model of individual cognition in mind, I then argue against the consensus model of collective action within the context of organizations. Not only does the evidence suggest that consensus is not necessary, but that lack of consensus may be the norm. Drawing on Goffman's notion of surface agreement, I argue that it is our capacity to use only the thinnest premise for coordinating our activities with others that makes understanding collective action without consensus possible. The formal features of organizations play an important role in setting the grounds for these kinds of surface agreements. All of this suggests that while the problems organizations face and the problem of coordination are separate, that they are intertwined, often in troubling ways. The demands of coordinating—the social forces that help us work together—seep into the practical apprehension of the problem an organization faces. Information, knowledge, or evidence from out there in the world is not simply filtered through the design of an organization's structures or the particular interpretations of individuals. It is also filtered through established surface agreements, formal and informal, that make the ongoing work of coordinating the organization's many parts possible.

Chapter Two

Coordination without Consensus:

Therapy and Control in a Juvenile Delinquent Treatment Center

Introduction

This chapter examines the case of the Berkshire Farm, a residential treatment center for juvenile delinquents, from the perspective of organizational cognition. From this perspective, Berkshire Farm, as an organizational whole, appears to “think” about the problem of juvenile delinquency in contradictory ways. The competing demands of therapy and control are realized in a division of labor that pits the psychotherapeutic understanding of the administrators and clinical staff against the practical demands of control faced by the frontline staff. Such conditions have allowed for the development of distinct “epistemic cultures” (Knorr-Cetina 1999). The two sides of this divide—administrators and the clinical staff on one side, and teachers and child care workers on the others—look at the young men in their charge in fundamentally different ways, focusing on different sets of facts, employing different assumptions about human behavior, and coming away with very different interpretations what should be done. Yet these fundamentally different interpretations do not bring the organization to a grinding halt. And perhaps just as importantly, despite the fact that administrators and clinical staff clearly hold more organizational power, their therapeutic understanding of the problem does not prevail to the exclusion of the control-centered view of the frontline staff members. The two sides of the therapy-control divide are clearly aware of one another’s different point of view, but still manage to work together.

The interpretive organizational cognition framework emphasizes the active role organizations take in constructing the knowledge of and thinking about the issues central to the organization's mission. In this theoretical perspective, the world is an inherently complicated and ambiguous place. Organizations, through their actions, bring definition and structure to some slice of their larger organizational environment. Organizations are not just passive receivers of information from the outside world. Instead, they are active interpreters, bringing shape to the problems that they are attempting to solve. It is not difficult to see how such a perspective might apply to an organization like Berkshire Farm, an organization operating in the ambiguous and uncertain world of juvenile justice, where the competing institutional logics of social services and the criminal justice system come to a head. The problem with this interpretive organizational cognition framework is that it conflates issues of interpretation with issues of coordination. In different ways, this interpretive view of organizational cognition often assumes that organizational members draw on a shared interpretation of the problem in order to act collectively. Whether developed from the ground up in the process of sensemaking or imposed from the top down by organizational leadership, a shared understanding allows organizational members to understand and work with one another toward some shared ends. While it is certainly likely that a shared understanding has some role in some organizational settings, this is clearly not the case for Berkshire Farm.

The central puzzle that Berkshire Farm presents comes in two interrelated parts. The first part is that this is clearly an organization that works without a shared understanding of problem. To address this part, I draw on work critical of this deep consensus model of collective action. Here the notion of coordinating through practical activity, sustained by only a vague or thin semantic understanding, is key. The second part of the puzzle centers on the fact that although

the organization would seem to be dominated by the understanding of those with greater organizational power—in this case, the therapeutic understanding of the administration and the clinical staff—an alternative interpretation of the problems not only persists, but thrives within the organization. I argue that the interpretive power of formal organizational authority rests not so much in its direct engagement in the substance of the problem itself, but rather in the framing of the grounds of coordination. The fullness of the demands of practice eludes the apparent epistemic narrowing imposed by standards, procedures, and official paperwork, but these formal organizational features also make it clear what obligations those on the frontlines have to their organizational superiors. Berkshire Farm works as an organization not because its members share some understanding or some sense of the organization’s mission, but rather because these distinct communities of practice have figured out how to work together despite their fundamentally different understandings of the boys in their charge.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. First, I will examine the key theoretical issues at stake under the problem of organizational cognition. My goal is to provide both the grounding for a model of coordination without consensus, as well as reimagining of the relationship between formal organizational authority and interpretation. Next, I will provide some background about the data collected and its limits. From there, I will give a descriptive account of Berkshire Farm today to provide the reader with some sense of the organizational setting. I will then provide a brief historical overview of Berkshire Farm to trace the development of the therapeutic perspective and its relationship to the organization’s authority. Next, I will explore the key tension between the administrators and clinical staff on the one hand and the child care workers and the teachers on the other. I will then consider the ways in which organizational authority is exercised through the formal organizational features—in this case, paperwork and the behavioral

management system—and how people negotiate with these formal demands in practice. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of interpretation, coordination, and authority.

Theoretical Considerations

An organization's division of labor into specialized tasks and specialized areas of expertise are what make an organization potentially greater than the sum of its parts. Having many minds and hands on the different parts of a complex problem, ideally, allows the group to accomplish what no individual could. However, there is a fundamental tension between the development of both wider and deeper areas of expertise among specialists and the need to coordinate among those specialized understandings.

Traditionally within organization studies, the problem of coordinating among specialists has been considered largely a structural problem. Such a view prevails in the computational or information-processing view of organizational cognition (Lant 2002), exemplified in the cognitive-behavioral approach of the Carnegie school (e.g. March and Simon 1993 [1958]; Cyert and March 1992 [1964]). In this view, knowledge is largely imagined as *information*—some readily identifiable signal. The output of one group could become the input for another group in an unproblematic way. Some early research in this line of thinking focused on the problem of organizational design (Galbraith 1973). For organizations dealing with largely technical problems, such a framework has some sense. Thompson, for example, connected types of interdependence among tasks to types of coordination: *standardization* works under conditions of *pooled interdependence*; *coordination by plan* helps in situations with *sequential interdependence*; and *coordination by mutual adjustment* (i.e. communication) works in situations of reciprocal interdependence (1967: pp. 54-56). How one organizational task depends

on another determines how those tasks should be coordinated; it was largely a matter of putting the pieces together in the right way, with the right processes in place. Thompson's model assumes (not necessarily naively) that standardization, planning, and communication are straightforward and unproblematic. The contentious and often fraught practical experience of deciding what the standard operating procedure should be or which plan an organization should implement is put aside.⁸ More recently, one can find a similar line of thinking in the work on *organizational modularity*, which considers the ways firms in the high technology fields develop specialized organizational roles and divisions of labor reflective of the distinct but interconnected parts of high technology products (Brusoni and Prencipe 2001; Langolis 2002). What is important to realize about this perspective is that the flatter understanding of what constitutes individual and organizational knowledge (as information) and thinking (as primarily decision-making) complements a straightforward reading of the formal structures and processes of an organization as effective in coordinating its various parts. Epistemology, as the cognitive rules-in-use, and coordination go hand-in-hand.

Counter to this computational or information-processing view of organizational cognition is the interpretive approach (Lant 2002). In this view, the world is a complicated place, filled with ambiguity. Knowledge is not information, but the product of active construction. Cognition, or thinking, is more closely tied to the flow of activity and the interpretive processes therein (conscious/deliberate or unconscious/implicit). In this view, organizations are "groups composed of individuals with distributed-segmented, partial-images of a complex environment [that] can,

⁸ There are many good organizational ethnographies that emphasize just these kinds of problems. Technicians might negotiate with and even skirt standard operating procedures to fix a problem (Orr 1996). Engineers and management might struggle over organizational priorities (Kunda 1992), or the marketing department might debate with the creative teams from the advertizing department over credit for a successful campaign (Jackall and Hirota 2003). Examples abound from a variety of organizational settings.

through interaction synthetically construct a representation of it that works; one which in its interactive complexity, outstrips the capacity of any single individual in the network to represent and discriminate events” (Taylor and Van Every: 2000: p. 207). Given these many “partial-images,” organizations of any size and complexity regularly face the problem of bringing some kind of coherence to the different meanings various members bring to the same problem. Indeed, studies from cognitive science, organizational studies, cultural sociology, and science and technology studies have been wrestling with the inherently problematic nature of coordinating different points of view within an organization in various settings. Once interpretation becomes the primary cognitive mode of interest, and once knowledge is tied to particular perspectives⁹, then coordination becomes inherently problematic—that is, if one assumes that epistemology and coordination go hand-in-hand.

Perhaps most relevant to this discussion is the work of Karl Weick—in particular, his concept of “sensemaking” ([1969] 1979; 1995; 2001). Weick argues that one of the primary functions of any organizations is, in fact, “organizing,” which he defines as “consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors” ([1969] 1979: p. 3). In the context of an organization, equivocal or ambiguous information or raw data are potentially problematic, as they might suggest different courses of action to different groups within the organization. Organizations thus frequently engage in sensemaking with the hope of establishing some semblance of order to the world, as well as some “sense” of what the organization will be holding itself accountable for in this established order. Weick emphasizes the importance of communication in the ongoing task of sensemaking: “Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence” (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2009:

⁹ I simply mean to contrast this with the concept of “information,” which is generally assumed to have an objective, decontextualized quality to it.

p. 131). Formal and informal interactions and communications are the way in which a shared sense or understanding of the problem emerges (Taylor and Van Every 2001). Developing a shared sense of the problem helps prevent the organization from being pulled into different directions simultaneously. In other words, coordinating an organization's various parts would not be possible without some shared sense of the problem.

Recently, a wide array of research has called into question the idea that a shared understanding of a problem is necessary for collective action. Donnellon, Gray, and Bourgon (1986) point out that an organization's members often give a particular organizational action multiple meanings, but that does not necessarily delay or prevent that action from taking place. Fiol (1994) argues that what matters in organizations is not the shared meaning of the problem itself, but rather a shared framing of the organization's response to it. Lamont (2009) details the various strategies academics engage in—such as horse-trading and deferring to other's expertise—when attempting to define “excellence” across very different disciplinary standards while serving on research grant decision-making boards. Winship (unpublished) shows the way in which Boston's police department and a group of black ministers overcame decades of racial mistrust and mutual suspicion to work together to reduce street violence, in spite of very different understandings of the problem and its solution. Stark (2009) considers the ways in which coexisting competing logics of valuation—that is, a permanent state of non-consensus—actually drives innovation in organizational and economic behavior. In science and technology studies, there has been some very important work exploring similar themes within the context of the production of scientific knowledge. As Star argues: “Common myths characterize scientific cooperation as deriving from a consensus imposed by nature. But if we examine the actual work of scientific enterprise, we find no such consensus. Scientific work neither loses its internal

diversity nor is consequently retarded by lack of consensus” (1993: p. 100; see also Star 1985). As Knorr-Cetina (1999) demonstrates, some of the most cutting-edge scientific discoveries are being made in large-scale laboratories across a variety of specialties, employing highly advanced technologies, under such conditions in which it would be impossible for any one individual to understand and synthesize all of the various parts. Specialists often have a hard time translating the significance of their own work or understanding of that of others, so they often must convince others of the significance of their work. To do this, these scientists employ variety of “ethnomethods”—such as unfolding, framing, or convoluting—not only to demonstrate their competence as scientists (and thus the trustworthiness of their claims), but also in to selectively highlight and mute pieces of information relevant to their peers. This work reveals not only the wide variety of contexts in which there must be coordination without consensus, but suggests that there is important interpretative work being done by various groups within and across organizations that does not necessarily result in shared meaning or consensus. In other words, these different groups are coming to some “sense” or understanding of the collective action that allows them to cooperate and coordinate their actions without necessarily having to agree with those with whom they are working.

In his more recent work, Weick has conceded that a shared understanding might not be necessary for coordination:

When information is distributed among numerous parties, each with a different impression of what is happening, the cost of reconciling these disparate views is high, so discrepancies and ambiguities in outlook persist. Thus, multiple theories develop about what is happening and what needs to be done, people learn to work interdependently despite couplings loosened by the pursuit of diverse theories, and inductions may be more clearly associated with effectiveness when they provide equivalent rather than shared meanings. (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld [2005] 2009: p. 145)

While consensus or shared meaning might be the preferred outcome of organizational sensemaking, it might not always be possible. Rather we must settle for “equivalent” meanings (that is, there is no superordination among competing understandings) and learning to work together. This is consistent with work on organizational leadership and communication that points to the clear advantages of employing vague and ambiguous language to describe organizational actions, goals, etc (Cohen and March 1986; Eisenberg 2006). If anything, this begins to move us away from the deep consensus model of collective action, and move us toward a model more akin to Goffman’s notion of “surface agreement,” or the idea that most social interactions work with only thin “veneer of consensus” about just what interaction is about (1959). What all of this points to is an analytic need to separate out the problems of interpretation from the problem of coordination. Differences in individual interpretations do not necessarily interfere with the practical demands of coordination because they are not always relevant.

The deep consensus model of collective action also places too much emphasis on the conceptual aspects of cognition and knowledge. The idea of having a shared understanding of a problem generally points in the direction of having a shared articulation of the key issues at stake. But a growing body of research interested in the nature of organizational knowledge suggests that conceptual knowledge and thinking are not the only forms of knowledge and thinking that make an organization work. In particular, the problem of translating knowledge within and across organizational contexts that has become the focus of a growing body of literature within organizational studies. This problem is not only related to the problem of organizational learning (Argyris and Schön 1996), but also the more general problem of innovation and adaptation. The difficulty of translating expertise and “best practices” across organizational boundaries has led to a deeper examination of the nature of organizational

knowledge. Some have attempted to explain the apparent “stickiness” (or converse “leakiness”) of knowledge as a property of the knowledge itself (Cook and Brown 1999), pointing to Polanyi’s (1966) distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge as a potential explanation (Nonaka and von Grogh 2009). However, some have turned away from conceiving organizational knowledge as something to be possessed, and turned toward the idea that knowledge—explicit and tacit—can only be understood as enacted in practice (Brown and Duguid 1991; 1998; 2001; Orlikowski 2002). Practical activity, enmeshed in the complexities and ambiguities of the day-to-day problems, draws on a richer understanding of such problems that cannot necessarily be captured by abstract concepts, or for that matter, formal organizational rules, procedures, standards, and protocol.

Social scientific research returns to this pragmatic understanding of knowledge across a variety of organizational settings again and again. Garfinkel (1967) illustrates how the practice of apparently vague or bad medical records actually helped doctors communicate to each other surreptitiously, without upsetting their patients. Zimmerman (1970) shows how apparently social work administrators interpret and creatively apply and violate standardized rules in case-by-case decision-making at a social welfare office. Latour’s work on the production of scientific knowledge (Latour and Bruno 1986) emphasizes the role of actual laboratory practices in constructing and producing seemingly abstract and objective scientific knowledge. Carlile (2002) details how even something apparently technical and rational, like product development, involves a series of pragmatic negotiations and translations across different departments within an organization. Huising and Silbey (2011) show how abstract safety regulations require creative, pragmatically-oriented interpretation to be realized effectively in actual laboratory spaces. Broadly speaking, this kind of research points to not only the way in which abstractions

and concepts (no matter how well-articulated) fail to capture the kind of thinking and knowledge required for the demands of practice, but also to the way in which practices are also social—that is, oriented to the problem of coordination.

This social-oriented conceptualization of practical activity is probably most fully-articulated in Lave and Wenger’s notion of “community of practice” (1991). In a community of practice, belonging to the group and participation in some practical activity are intertwined. There is a “mutual engagement” in some practical activity that is a “joint enterprise”; however, “the enterprise is joint not in that everybody believes the same things or agrees with everything, but that it is communally negotiated” (Wenger 1999: p. 78). Effectively working together, in this sense, appears to have a much more modest understanding of coordination. Instead of people figuring out if they agree on everything, they simply adjust their own activities to those with whom they are working. Join practical activity can establish a kind of surface agreement where more profound differences (which may be disruptive to coordination) get put aside. This is not to say that beliefs and shared meaning play no role—in fact, Wenger argues that such communities of practice eventually develop a “shared repertoire” of symbols, understandings, and so on (1999: pp. 82-83). What is key is that practice itself, rather than a shared conceptual framework, can be the grounds for effective coordination.

Any organization of any size and complexity is likely to deal with the problem of multiple communities of practice—groups that develop distinct habits of mind based on their training, day-to-day experiences, responsibilities, and consistent mutual engagement. This issue of “locality” (Wenger 1999: p. 123), or the practical and spatial separation of communities of practice, brings up an important question: how do distinct communities of practice work together? Wenger suggests several things: boundary objects, brokering, boundary practices, overlaps, and borrowed styles or discourse (1999: p. 129). In other words, distinct groups do some combination of conceptual or practical coordination. Star and Greisner’s (1989) seminal

piece on the Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology offers a compelling analysis of just such a situation. Star and Greismer examine how professional scientists were able to enlist a variety of communities of practice with a variety of interests—scientists, donors, conservationists, amateurs, including local farmers and trappers—to effectively produce a body of specimens and knowledge that contributed directly to advances in the scientific theory of evolution.

In order for this work to happen, Star and Greismer argue that two things were key in making this situation work— method standardization and “boundary objects”. Standardizing the methods of specimen collection, in effect, allowed amateurs to participate in the scientific enterprise (that is, by producing scientifically *usable* data) without necessarily having to understand the scientific theory behind the enterprise. Complementing the process of standardization is their concept of boundary objects, which they define:

Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. These objects may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. (Star and Greisemer 1989: p 393)

Boundary objects in their case study included things like *repositories*, such as libraries or museums, *ideal types*, such as diagrams, atlases, or even species descriptions (as opposed to specimens), and *standardized forms*. The idea is that these objects are recognizable and understandable to each interested group involved in the collective enterprise, but not necessarily recognized nor understood in the same way. Boundary objects allow each group to maintain some semblance of autonomy in its understanding of the problem and its related practices (e.g. conservation of California or trapping for money), while coordinating those practices within the collective whole.

Star and Greismer's case is an important one to consider, as much for its weaknesses as its strengths. They argue that the case of the Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology is one of a relatively "flat" organizational structure. In a flat structure, "entrepreneurs" must use boundary objects to translate their purposes to other groups in order to gain allies to cooperate with their efforts. Conversely, in hierarchical organizational structure, those at the top of the hierarchy impose meanings for those below to use. There are two things wrong with this account. First, such a description of their own example belies some obvious imbalances in authority among the actors Star and Greismer identify. There is an important question being overlooked—namely, who sets the standards for the methods and the boundary objects? Second, even in strictly hierarchical organizational structures, there are still a plurality of understandings and interpretations. Hierarchies don't necessarily eliminate the problem posed by multiple communities of practice.

Star and Greismer's case is about the problem of coordination, but their proposed solutions—method standardization and boundary objects—underplay both the role of practice and the role of authority in coordination. The term boundary object gives the impression that the object itself is an agent of coordination. But almost any sufficiently complex object invites multiple interpretations. What is important is not that these objects travel across different communities of practice, but that different communities of practice interpret and constitute such objects in different ways, *due to the demands of their practices*. The idea that boundary objects facilitate "translation" across communities of practice falls back on understanding of coordination as an activity requiring shared understanding. Effective practical coordination often means putting aside or ignoring differences rather than attempting to reconcile them.

Perhaps more importantly is Star and Griesemer's neglect of the role of authority in setting the grounds for coordination. Who sets the standards for collection in their story? The scientists—this is no accident. Scientists are interested producing in de-localized, abstracted knowledge that “speaks” to the larger scientific community. This kind of knowledge certainly carries with it weight and authority in the social and cultural context of the time, even among donors who might be funding their projects. That is to say, that some meanings are more important than others. The other people involved in the collection and documentation of the specimens—farmers, trappers, amateurs, conservationists, etc—did not necessarily adopt or fully understand the thinking behind the standards for the methods of collection and documentation. Nor did they have to. They just had to do it that way, whether it was to get paid or to make the Berkeley scientists happy. Following the standards, filling out the documents in the prescribed way, simply became part of their set of practices. It was this practical activity—complying with the methodologies—that allowed them to coordinate with the scientists in the production of scientific knowledge. It did not necessarily change the meanings that they gave their own activities, nor did it necessarily result in profound changes of their existing practices. Filling out some forms and noting some key pieces of information (such as location) does not necessarily interfere with the way farmers and trappers went about procuring specimens.

With this example in mind, I want to suggest we consider the formal features of organizational life in new light. We often consider formal processes, procedures, rules, and of course, official forms and paperwork as doing a kind of epistemic narrowing, simplifying the understanding of the problem itself. Complex cases get reduced to simple categories. Measures fail to capture what really matters. Rule-based decision-making replaces discretion. Such things are, of course, problematic. But as much of the work focusing on the role of practices in fleshing

out the barebones of formal organizational rules and standards suggests, organization members often actively negotiate and creatively interpret such formal rules, standards, procedures, and so on, in order to get things done. The formal features of organizations do not necessarily stamp out alternative understandings, rooted in the experiences of actual day-to-day practice. Instead such standards and rules facilitate the practical coordination of the organization's various parts. Authority, in this case, is not about the total determination of another's activities, but rather about authoring some part of that practical activity toward some other end. In the case of the scientists, they did not want to determine, and perhaps did not want to know, how an experienced trapper might go about effectively procuring specimens. The scientists only cared if such specimens arrive intact with the appropriate information documented.

Implicit in the notion of community of practice is the sense in which practitioners have authority, in a very pragmatic sense, over their particular area of practice—that is, there is a presumed sense of mastery over the particular problem on which they work. Any sufficiently large and complex organization that deals with multiple communities of practice is essentially a world where there are multiple spheres of pragmatic authority. Engineers are not necessarily interested in telling accountants what to do, and vice versa. Organizational, or managerial authority, is not about necessarily controlling or eliminating those various spheres of pragmatic authority, but rather effectively coordinating them. Formal rules, standards, measures, processes, forms, and so on are all part of that authority. Certainly, such formal features can become disruptive and counterproductive to an organization's substantive goals. However, for now, I want to suggest that such formal features play an important role in making coordination without consensus possible.

A Note on Data and Methods

My relationship with Berkshire Farm began in January 2000, when I began an internship there—along with about twenty other undergraduates—as part of a Williams College Winter Study course. I split my time between the Farm’s research department, where I did data entry and helped in the administration of some kind of satisfaction survey, and the Farm’s junior/senior high school, where I acted as a kind of teaching assistant, helping the boys with their class work. This experience led directly to my employ as a part-time tutor at the Farm for a few hours a day, two evenings a week for the Spring of 2000. After a six-month absence, during which I lived and studied abroad, I returned to my tutoring position straight through from January 2001 to May 2002.

During most of this time, I had not considered looking at this organization with a sociological eye. In fact, when it came time to commit to doing a senior thesis during the Spring of 2001, I had another project in mind entirely. When those plans fell through, I mentioned to my undergraduate adviser, James Nolan, the work I was doing at Berkshire Farm, as well as the fact that the Farm also had archives of its then 116-year-old history that had been, as far as I had been told from people at the Farm, largely untouched. Professor Nolan seemed to be very excited about the possibility of me doing research at Berkshire Farm, and I quickly fed off of his enthusiasm and developed a research plan. I was going to spend my summer splitting my time between the Berkshire Farm archives and doing “ethnographic” research throughout the treatment center. With Professor Nolan’s help, I was even able to get some grant money from Williams College to fund my efforts.

Once I had a plan in mind, I began working with the head of Volunteer Services, to gain access to the organization. I had known this man since my internship in January 2000, so he seemed enthusiastic about helping me to get permission to study the various parts of the treatment center. Once Berkshire Farm's administration granted me permission to do my research project, he put me in touch with various staff members throughout the Farm, including the director of the archives.

The vast majority of "data" was thus collected in the three summer months of 2001, though some of it trickled into the fall of that year. I split my time between sifting through the archives—which largely consisted of Annual Reports, old copies of a Berkshire Farm newspaper, and a host of other materials that could be described as public relations material—and observing at the Berkshire Farm school and "cottages" [dormitories]. In addition to these observations, I did formal interviews with staff members throughout the Farm, including a dozen teachers (some in pairs), ten childcare workers, eight social workers, two clinicians, and four high level administrators. Eighteen of these interviews were tape-recorded. I took notes during the other interviews—usually based on the preferences of the interviewee (all of the teachers I spoke to, for example, preferred not to be recorded). Of course, there were also countless informal conversations and experiences, as an observer and as an employee that shaped my understanding of the organization.

This combination of archival material, observational notes, and interview data made up the heart of what would be my lengthy senior honors thesis. In a way, this paper represents an attempt to return to this data with the added benefit of a more sophisticated theoretical lens. Speaking with the benefits of both hindsight and graduate training in qualitative methodologies, I want to say that the data that I collected then are flawed, but with hope, not necessarily fatally

flawed. There are issues of archival curation bias, interview sampling bias, as well as the omnipresent issues that my identity, along whatever dimensions, might have played in my observations, interviews, and other interactions with staff members and the youth. Knowing what I know now, I would have done a much better job taking more objective, concrete and elaborate notes, conducting interviews, comporting myself within the field, sampling interviews along particular criteria, and so on. Instead, what I have is a couple notebooks of handwritten notes of an ambitious but perhaps undertrained 21-year-old, dozens of pages of paperwork and forms then employed by the center, a couple hundred photocopied pages of archival material, tapes of eighteen interviews, as well as my initial one-hundred-sixty-plus-page attempt to create a historical and ethnographic account of Berkshire Farm.

I think there is an honest question about what truths might be gleaned from such imperfect, if well-intended, sources. In my estimate, there is, in the words of John Van Maanen, enough data buried in the bramble of amateurish efforts to “be empirical enough to be credible and analytical enough to be interesting” (1988: p. 29). But I leave it to the reader to decide.

The Setting

Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth is a large, one-hundred-twenty-six-year-old private organization contracted with the State of New York to provide a variety of social services to the state’s social service and juvenile justice agencies, including foster care programs, community-based group homes, prevention programming, detention services, a junior/senior high school, and residential treatment center. The Berkshire Farm residential treatment center, nestled among 2,000-acres in the wooded hills of Upstate New York, still occupies the same site

where its founder began a home for wayward boys in 1886. Lining the sprawling campus are all that is required to house, educate, and treat over 500 boys—nearly a dozen Spartan, one-story dormitories, several older, multi-story houses now serving as clinical or administrative offices, a large gymnasium, outdoor recreational space, a large industrial cafeteria, and a state-of-the-art middle/senior high school.

On any day at Berkshire Farm, the frenetic activity of these 500 boys—almost all of them adjudicated delinquent by the state’s juvenile court or labeled a Person In Need of Supervision [PINS] by the family court—flows around the campus, from the “cottages” [dormitories], to the school, to recreation center, and back. Some of these boys are as young as twelve, while others are young men over the age of eighteen. They are white, black, Latino, and Asian. They come from places like the South Bronx, Queens, Albany, Troy, Buffalo, Syracuse, and the myriad small towns scattered throughout the state. Some are gang members. Some are just “wanna-be” toughs. Some are just lost, abandoned to the state’s foster care system. Once on the Farm, they don the standard issued khaki pants and green polo shirts. Whatever gang colors they may have “repped” [represented] have been confiscated. These boys are part of the Farm, enveloped in its routine, and encountering the shared trials of living, learning, and rehabilitating alongside these many, very different souls.

An average day begins in the cottage. Childcare workers—typically large imposing men, many of whom are “graduates” of Berkshire Farm themselves—bark orders to get everyone up and out the door. The boys get up, get dressed, and get in line. Some may linger through the routine as an act of petulance, or perhaps as an act of playful rebellion, testing the patience of their supervisors. From the cottage, they will head out in one line to the cafeteria for breakfast. Several child care workers flank the line, shepherding the boys as they move across campus.

This happens at each of the cottages across the campus. The throngs converge on the cafeteria. It is chaotic, but not quite chaos.

After breakfast, the childcare workers will lead the boys, by cottage, to the school. Just outside the school, the various groups wait to be led into the school in controlled manner. The boys then settle into their assigned classes, reflective of their grade level and aptitude. The school's classrooms appear modern, well-maintained and well-stocked, just as one might find in a typical suburban school. The teachers range in age, but most are veteran teachers, experienced enough to deal with the combination of classroom behavioral problems, as well as the many remedial and special education demands this particular population presents. One key difference with this school is the looming presence of several plainclothes safety officers actively roaming the halls throughout the school day. They are just the push of a button away for the teachers.

The state of each classroom varies throughout the day. The boys tend to have significant academic deficiencies, either due to truancy, learning disabilities, or some combination thereof, so they have difficulties with the behavioral and academic demands of the classroom setting. Disruptions are not uncommon. It may begin with the simple act of defying a teacher's request to do an assignment that escalates into a heated argument. It may occur because one boy decides to attack a classmate because he is from a rival gang, or because they had a dispute in the cottage the night before. Whatever happens, the teachers are usually calls the officers, who arrive quickly and escort the disruptive student out the classroom and into one of the cool down spaces in the nearby offices. If need be, the officers will physically restrain and remove such disruptive boys. After the offending student is removed, the classes move on.

The boys will move from the school to the cafeteria for lunch, and then back to the school again. After the end of the school day, the boys will be led back to their cottages by the childcare workers. During the afternoons, a variety of things happen. There is recreation time, where the childcare workers lead the boys over to the gym to play basketball. There is downtime at the cottage, where the boys mill about in the common space and their rooms. Those who've earned privileges might be allowed a can of soda or a chance to play a video game. The childcare workers are right there watching them, joking with them, chatting with them.

If one looked past the overall ebb and flow of the 500 boys and examined the details of the setting, one clearly sees what Nolan (1998) calls the "triumph of the therapeutic ethos." Adorning the institutional-white cinder block walls of the cottages and the school are colorful posters exhorting the virtues of self-esteem, giving inspirational words of encouragement, displaying psychologist Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" or even advising on how to control one's emotions. In the cottages, staff members would round up boys into the common spaces for various "groups" required as part of the boys' treatment. These groups might focus on some things as simple as life skills (such as personal hygiene or basic deportment), or as emotionally-charged as grief or drug counseling. Boys might also have one-on-one meetings with the cottage's clinical social worker. In the schools, the boys might be pulled out of their "child-centered" classroom for an individual therapy session with a psychologist or psychiatrist from the Farm's clinical staff. Even at the cafeteria, there is a separate line for the boys to receive with their meal any prescribed medications, many of which are psychopharmacological in nature. In the Farm's public relations material and on the lips of the upper level administrators is an abiding concern for helping the boys deal with their emotions, the trauma they have faced, their

low self-esteem, as well as any other cognitive or psychological deficits that they might have as the result of their troubled backgrounds.

The work itself is at once wrapped up in the intimate details of the lives of these many boys and decidedly routinized, standardized, and controlled. For Berkshire Farm to work, the work of Berkshire Farm has to be both therapy and control. But long before Berkshire Farm was a large, therapeutic-oriented bureaucratic organization, it was a small, religiously-oriented working farm designed to “save wayward boys.” The gradual rise of the therapeutic ethos at Berkshire Farm reveals how this particular understanding of the problem of juvenile delinquency is both embedded in the rather removed practices of clinical staff members, as well as the Farm’s administrative leadership.

Historical Background: From Saving the Wayward to Treating the Disturbed

Long before Berkshire Farm was a large, multi-service, multi-agency social service provider, it was an actual farm. In fact, its main residential treatment facility and school, which are the focus of this paper, are still located on that farmland. In 1885, Frederick Burnham, a moderately wealthy lawyer from Morristown, New Jersey, purchased 1000 acres of land in east central New York State from the Lebanon Shakers. Burnham had ambitions of retiring to a “gentleman’s farm” nestled in the idyllic Berkshire Hills. During the next year, Frederick and his wife, Catherine, took an extended trip across Europe, becoming deeply impressed with the way European authorities were handling the budding problem of juvenile delinquency. Upon their return, the Burnhams decided that their pastoral land would be put to better use in “saving wayward boys.” On May 12th, 1886, the New York State legislature officially recognized the

incorporation of Burnham Industrial Farm, (later called Berkshire Industrial Farm and then Berkshire Farm), as a private school for wayward boys.

It was during the nineteenth century that the juvenile justice system began to take shape as an institutional entity separate from the adult criminal justice system. Large reformatories began cropping up in burgeoning urban centers like Chicago and New York as early as 1820; they were the first institutional alternative to sending young criminals to prison. But by the late nineteenth century, Progressive social reformers began to see juvenile delinquency and even reform schools as part of the same problem—namely, the troubling social decay of America’s urban industrial centers. To these reformers, “children were the innocent victims of culture conflict and the technological revolution” that was going on in immigrant-filled, factory-driven cities (Platt 1977: p. 36). To counteract the ill-effects of city life on these unsupervised poor children, Progressive social reformers began developing an alternative institutional model sometimes referred to as the “cottage plan” or the “family plan” (Platt 1977: pp. 62-66). Burnham Industrial Farm, for all intents and purposes, was on the vanguard of this movement.

In its early days, Berkshire Industrial Farm (Burnham’s modesty drove the first name change in 1896) was a religious-oriented, working farm. The founders commitment to the tenets of the Protestant Ethic ran deep; in fact, they even adapted the nearby Shaker motto—“Hands to work, and hearts to God”—as their own. Delinquents and orphans from nearby cities (such as New York City, Newark, Boston) would be shipped by a magistrate or some other local official to the Farm, where they would live in a *cottage* with several other boys and *cottage parents*, who were typically a childless, married Christian couple of good repute. The daily routine at this time usually consisted of multiple visits to the chapel, several hours of remedial schooling, military drills, recreation, and hours of chores on the Farm. In fact, within a few years from its inception,

the Farm became largely self-sustaining, providing most of the food for the staff and its charges, thanks to the work of these boys. The idea was that these once wayward boys would flourish under the influence of their “good Christian” cottage parents, as well as the discipline and hard work required for the country life. In essence, the boys were being raised on the Farm for a good part of their adolescence. The hope was that once they got old enough they might be able to find steady employ, most often in manual labor of some kind.

In 1917, over thirty years after its founding, then superintendent of Berkshire Industrial Farm, Edmund Hilliard, hired Doctor Clinton P. McCord, an Albany-area psychiatrist, as a “Consulting Psycho-pathologist to the Farm.” Superintendent Hilliard contracted McCord to provide basic psychiatric and intelligence examinations to the Farm’s current population, as well as any incoming boys. The Superintendent wrote to Farm’s donors, explaining his decision in the *Berkshire Industrial Farm Record* (a decision that would need their financial support):

The time is coming when children will be properly examined before they are sent to institutions; when children will not be reproached or punished for falling short of a standard beyond their reach on account of their defective nature; when institutions will not be called upon to waste time and effort in seeking to bring all their charges to a given standard of thought, behavior, and morals; and when the public will recognize that the science of caring for the young depends not so much on the application of fixed standards of education as on conforming methods to the individual by first studying the nature of the individual.

Within this call to reduce waste and inefficiency and improve the existing efforts is an assumption about the promise of “scientific” knowledge that a psychiatrist could produce for a place like the Farm. Even McCord himself claimed: “Only a comprehensive scientific examination of the individual will give us reliable information.” But despite this high-minded

rhetoric, the Superintendent's goal was not necessarily to re-imagine the purpose—and thus practices of the Farm—but rather to improve or supplement its efforts.¹⁰

Importantly, Dr. McCord's examinations and recommendations largely stood outside the flow of the normal day-to-day work of the Berkshire Industrial Farm. The goal of the psychiatrist's "mental tests" was to classify the delinquent boys into "scientifically" determined categories. Supposedly, those labeled "feeble-minded" and "mentally deficient" could be identified and then separated from the rest of the population, and if possible sent to another institution. The archival material was not clear on how often this happened; though there was some suggestion transfers were rare, at least initially. For example, the Superintendent, reporting the case of one new boy who had been "revealed" by "psychopathic examination" to donors in 1919, admitted that despite this new knowledge, the boy kept running away. He explained that they had "not reached that scientific point" where they could determine whether or not to "remove" the boy from the Farm; moreover, there were no "facilities of transfer made as yet sufficiently easy, where we transfer a boy without giving him a good try-out." In other words, there is some indication that, at least at first, McCord's psychologically-informed diagnoses led to few real practical consequences.

This would begin to change in 1921, with the arrival of a new superintendent, Andrew G. Johnson. Superintendent Johnson seemed to share his predecessor's enthusiasm for psychology and science. During his first year, he ordered the construction of a new building, which would

¹⁰ Hilliard seemed quite conscious of the potential threat introducing "science" had on the religious and moral intentions of the Farm, especially in the eyes of his donors. He wrote to them in 1919: "Science must be associated with spiritual effort in dealing with the individual child...Science, with its ideals of economy and efficiency is but a twin sister of the spirit, each capable of helping the other in reaching and caring for the individual." Here we have a deeply Protestantized version of science, consistent with the efforts of industry, self-rationalization, and even individualism. Perhaps there is more here, as Lyman and Viddich (1987) suggested in their analysis of the relationship between liberal Protestantism and American social science.

house a new vocational training program. The vocational programming included auto-mechanics, basic carpentry, printing (the Farm had its own print shop that produced its newsletters and other materials), agriculture, and plumbing. Now the boys would attend school six hours a day—three hours of practical work and three hours of more traditional schooling. McCord's intelligence tests now proved helpful in determining what program the Farm should place a boy. As Superintendent Johnson explained, this was much more preferred than the "trial and error method."

Superintendent Johnson was so convinced of the potential benefit psychiatry had to the work of the Farm that in 1924 he established a "psychiatry clinic" and department staffed by McCord, a psychologist, a psychiatric social worker, and even its own secretary. The psychologist, Eleanor Clifton, largely took over the testing responsibilities. The social worker, Mary C. Sumner, was tasked with researching the boys' backgrounds. The department's responsibilities included both "the individual study and treatment of the problem boy" and the "research into the causes and cure of juvenile delinquency and aberrational behavior." Ultimately, this meant that members of the department played a more intrusive role in the work of the Farm than before, introducing new practices. These practices included weekly "conferences" between individual boys and a member of the clinical staff, "scientific" guidance for other Farm staff members from the clinical staff, and even the introduction of therapies, like therapeutic baths.¹¹

This new prominence in the work of the Farm was short-lived for Dr. McCord's department. When the grant money from the Commonwealth Fund of New York City dried up in

¹¹ While an exact description of therapeutic baths did not appear in the Farm's archives, they were ominously described as "continuous baths for mentally disturbed cases and equipped for giving electric and mechanical treatment where indicated."

1927, the Farm's Board of Directors failed to provide the level of funding McCord had expected, so he and his staff resigned. The Farm would hire another psychiatrist, but his stint ended with the onset of the Great Depression. Over the next decade and a half, the Farm's ventures into the world of psychology slowed to a trickle—a “psychiatric social worker” was brought on, but in a limited capacity. In fact, the Farm, like many other organizations, struggled to stay afloat during these trying financial times. It was not until after the Second World War that psychology made a more permanent and invasive return into the day to day practices of the Farm.

In 1947, Berkshire Industrial Farm hired its first Executive Director (they did away with the superintendent title), Henry R. Murphy. This was a true watershed moment for the Farm. Murphy brought with him a profoundly different understanding of the problem of juvenile delinquency, and with it a plan to radically reshape the organization and work of the Farm. In his first address to the Farm's benefactors in 1947, he explained to them: “Delinquency is the result of emotional disturbance and inner conflict due to many causes.” These included “lack of parental understanding,” “lack of sound habit training,” inadequate schooling, “parental rejection,” and “adverse environmental situations.” Murphy changed the language of the Farm; the boys were no longer “wayward”, rather they referred to the boys as “troubled”; the Farm was no longer “saving” the boys, rather it was “treating” them.

In fact, the language and logic of the psychotherapeutic supplanted the language and logic of liberal Protestantism as the “language of legitimation” (Nolan 1998) or logic of legitimation. While Superintendent McCord was careful to justify adding a psychiatric department as being consistent with the religious intentions of the Farm in the 1920s, Executive Director Murphy justified the Farm's religious programming according to its consistency with

psychotherapeutic purposes and understanding. By 1948, he was describing the Farm's religious education as being "modern, factual, and psychologically adapted." In a 1952 Annual Report, Murphy declared: "Religion is Therapy." By the mid 1950s, the Farm sought a full-time chaplain with "clinical pastoral training" and chapel attendance was spoken about for its "therapeutic value." The Farm's work was now to be understood as in the service of therapy, not necessarily God—an idea that the Farm's founders might have considered blasphemous in their day.

This ideological shift had significant practical consequences. With this new understanding of the problem and its solution, Murphy pushed for major changes in the staffing and practices of the Farm. He wrote to donors in the 1947 annual report: "To achieve results with our boys we must have a stable and well coordinated staff, who believe in the fundamental worth of every child and who have training or are trainable in mental hygiene and group therapy as it applies to child care." A year later, Murphy was making similar request to members of the Farm's Board of Directors:

If Berkshire Industrial Farm is to be a treatment center for disturbed youngsters, the Board must face at the earliest possible date its responsibility to increase income so that a staff capable of performing the services required of such a center... This involves adequate case work, staff, more psychiatric services, an adequate and experienced teaching staff, and group technicians.

Murphy not only wanted to bring on additional staff members, he wanted to change the work being done by already existing staff members—such as teachers and cottage parents—to be more consistent with therapeutic purposes. This is a sharp contrast even to the initial introduction of the psychology to the Farm in 1917, which was largely peripheral to the main practices and work of the rest of the Farm staff. Whereas before this expert, technical knowledge largely supplemented the local knowledge and practices of staff, now this expert, technical knowledge presumed to inform and improve upon established knowledge and practices.

At the heart of this ideological shift and its practical consequence is a fundamental re-imagining of the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency. When the Farm's founders spoke about saving the wayward, they described a religious endeavor—an endeavor that might be described as perpetual in a traditional Christian theological framework that considers human nature tainted by Original Sin. In order to engage in this kind of endeavor, the Farm's founders relied heavily on traditional institutions to structure the “work” of the Farm—namely, religion, family, work, and school. There was tremendous faith that these institutional structures, even imperfectly reproduced in the form of cottage parents, could shape the lives of the wayward boys for the better. Within this framework, there was little consideration as to whether there was more information about these boys that could be potentially relevant to the Farm's work. The proper moral environment, run by those guided by good Christian virtues, could correct these boys' moral failings. When the Farm's administrators and board of directors embraced a more “modern” and “scientific” approach to dealing with juvenile delinquents, they began to speak about the “problem” of juvenile delinquency, “problem boys,” and then “treating the disturbed.” In effect, moral endeavor became a technical problem with a solution (even if the solutions hadn't caught up with the ambitions of the practitioners). And like most stubborn technical problems, juvenile delinquency would require more and more information and well-trained technicians and specialists able to cull through that information in a meaningful way. The work and organization of work at Berkshire Industrial Farm would necessarily need to be changed to accommodate this new approach.

Executive Director Murphy did just that. He hired a psychiatrist to meet with the “most severely disturbed boys” as well as to educate “all staff members in modern principles of mental hygiene and the psychiatric viewpoint.” He hired a psychologist to run intelligence and

personality tests, as well as the occasional “therapeutic interview.” In addition, Murphy hired several social workers. His description of their role in his 1948 annual report to the board of directors is especially revealing:

It is she¹² who acts as a liaison with his family, the referring agency or court, who follows his development physically, educationally, socially, and who see the whole boy. It is she who assimilates data from the homelife, psychological, health, school, and recreational staff and interprets the boy’s difficulties, anxieties and problems to other workers with more limited contacts and interprets his growth to the boy himself. Because she plays no disciplinary role her relationship is quite different from that of the administration, the cottage parents or the teacher. She is a repository of information, an objective counselor and the recipient of many confidences. In an institution providing treatment and attempting to redirect a boy’s life, the case worker is a vital element.

Not only is the social worker afforded a privileged position in the management and interpretation of these various forms of information, but she also has no disciplinary obligations toward the youth in her charge. In embracing the scientific view of the *problem* of delinquency, the Farm’s leadership (like most juvenile justice organizations of its day) placed a premium on information and the expert interpretation of that information, even to the point where they separated information responsibilities from responsibilities of discipline and control, which was left to those in direct care of the boys, like the teachers or cottage parents. Such a dichotomy between *experts* and direct care staff would prove to be fundamental to the work of Berkshire Farm (and that of the juvenile justice field in general) over the latter half of the twentieth century.

Murphy’s successor, Donald Coldren, brought his own enthusiasm for the latest psychotherapeutically-oriented theories, attempting to improve on existing practices at the Farm as well as introduce new practices. In doing so, he reinforced the split between the experts—the clinical staff, the social workers—and the direct care staff, between therapy and control that

¹² At this point, all of the Farm’s social workers had been women. This was not unusual in the early days of the profession during the first half of the twentieth century, although it would soon change somewhat with the increased professionalization of social work after the Second World War.

began in earnest under Murphy. Importantly, this dichotomy was not one of equal terms. In 1954, Executive Director Coldren told a local newspaper, *The Berkshire Eagle*:

The second essential of a treatment program is study of each individual child which will result in understanding the feelings, motives, and attitudes of each child for whom staff members are responsible so that he may be helped develop the best within himself...As the result of child study every member of the staff needs to know what the goals are for each child for whom he takes any responsibility. As each child is different, treatment goals are different. The staff will be given training on how to work with individual boys along prescribed lines.

By the next year, Coldren made good on his promise to train his staff, reporting to the board of directors: “the Farm’s newly instituted in-service training program [was] built for the entire staff—from janitor to executive director—to make certain that the activities of everyone in the institution are directed to the child and his individual problems.”

There are a couple of important assumptions buried in Coldren’s explanation of this training worth paying attention to here. First, not only are “feelings, motives, and attitudes” given new ontological status in the psychotherapeutic worldview, but they are also only accessed through the careful study of an expert and cannot necessarily be apprehended by the direct care staff on their own—hence the need for training. Second, the insights of the psychotherapeutic approach are necessarily applicable to the other various responsibilities of the staff members. In other words, the idea is not that every staff member will become a therapist, but that every staff member needs to adjust their practices to the suggestions and advice offered by the experts in the psychotherapeutic approach.

Importantly, these “other” practices are not necessarily abandoned or excluded. There was a recognized need for the direct care staff to take up the responsibility of controlling the boys, but the direct care staff also needed to be informed of the way to do their jobs that was consistent with advice of the clinical staff. For example, Executive Director Coldren admitted in

his 1959 report to the board of directors that physical discipline—even slapping the boys—was necessary and permitted as “some boys only respond to physical types of control.” However, the manner in which this physical discipline was meted out needed to be consistent with therapeutic aims; it needed to be delivered in an emotionally controlled manner, and it needed to be discussed with the boy afterward.

Under Coldren, the psychotherapeutic approach pervaded life on Berkshire Farm (the “Industrial” was deemed incompatible with a program that “concentrates on treatment”). He expanded the clinical staff, expanded individual therapy, introduced group therapy, and experimented with “psychodrama” [role playing] therapy. In fact, he even claimed Berkshire Farm offered “milieu therapy”—“a total institutional environment that facilitates therapy.” To complement all of these therapeutic efforts, Coldren even brought on staff dedicated to researching the effectiveness programs and tracking Berkshire Farm’s recidivism rates in the late 1950s. All of these efforts place Berkshire Farm at the center of national efforts in the growing fields of juvenile justice and social work.

Coldren’s untimely death in 1963 forced the board of directors to find a director capable of continuing these efforts. They eventually settled on Abraham Novick, who had much more education and experience in the field of juvenile justice than his predecessors—a reflection of the fact that there was a professional field at that point. During his fourteen-year tenure, Abraham Novick expanded Coldren’s fledgling program, the Berkshire Farm Institute starting in 1964. The Berkshire Farm Institute trained the Farm’s staff, trained students in the field of social work, and even conducted research on the efficacy of current programs as well as new program ideas. In order to realize these ambitious goals, Novick also developed the Community Services program, which extended the reach of the Farm into the communities and even families of the

boys—social workers would begin to work with the boy’s family, and in some cases provide assistance or therapy to them, as soon as the boy was accepted into the Farm. In an interesting twist, Abraham Novick reinvigorated the vocational training at the Farm, even employing the boys to participate in the construction of five new cottages to house the Farm’s expanding clientele. By the mid-1970s, Abraham Novick established Berkshire Farm’s foster home program as well as its first group home in Rochester, New York. Unsurprisingly, Berkshire Farm changed its official name once more to reflect these expanded capacities and programs; Berkshire Farm for Boys became Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth.

Abraham Novick died suddenly in 1977, and after a lengthy search, the board of directors hired his brother, Harold, as his replacement. Under Harold Novick’s seventeen-year tenure, there was some experimentation with treatment programs of apparently mixed success, such as Positive Peer Culture during the 1980s or Aggression Replacement Therapy in the 1990s. In addition to this, there were increased drug and alcohol services, a broader array of group therapies, and even an “outdoor adventure-challenge program.” In 1992, a state-of-the-art junior/senior high was opened, complete with computers in every classroom, spelling the end for the vocational program. By the time Harold Novick retired in 1994, and current Executive Director, Rose Washington, succeeded him, Berkshire Farm was fully enmeshed with a variety of the State of New York’s social service agencies, from the Department of Education to the foster care system, from the juvenile justice system to mental health services. But even work within the Farm’s original campus seemed more complicated than it once was. In 1988, some of the last vestiges of the Farm’s original structure were done away with. The cottages, or dormitories, were no longer headed by cottage parents. In their place, there were six full-time child care workers (four during the day, two at night) and one “in-cottage” social worker.

Walking into Berkshire Farm today, one would hardly get the sense that the work being done there could have ever been managed by an upright, caring Christian couple. In their stead, one would find a staff of specialists—specialists enmeshed in the tangled web of a very modern bureaucratic organization.

Berkshire Farm's archival material is certainly limited. It largely reflects the perspective of the Farm's leadership, often at certain distance from the actual day-to-day practices. One might get the impression that the work of the Berkshire Farm staff members was largely pliant to the will of the successive administrators. For example, when reading how Executive Director Coldren offered to train the staff from the janitor on up to work in the "prescribed lines" of the latest psychotherapeutically informed theory, we get no sense of how the staff members reacted to this imposition from above. We have no idea just what the administration thought the staff members were doing wrong in their work, nor do we have any idea what improvements they suggested. Any evidence of protest, complaint, negotiation, or even grumbling from the staff members at the time has disappeared in the absences and silences of the written historical record.

However, there are still important lessons to be drawn from this flawed material. When the Farm's leadership embraced the psychotherapeutic perspective, they opened the doors to new forms of knowledge, understanding, and expertise that went beyond those already in practice at the Farm. Initially, this new form of knowledge, this new understanding of the delinquent boy, informed practices within an organizational layer largely separate from the existing organizational practices. Eventually, the Farm's leadership would come to see this new knowledge and understanding as necessarily informing and improving upon existing organizational practices, but not necessarily displacing it.

The experts in the psychotherapeutic approach—clinical psychiatrists, psychologists, and even social workers—were purposefully kept from the day-to-day responsibilities of managing, caring for, educating, and controlling the behavior of the Berkshire Farm boys. This division of cognitive labor was created to ensure that the clinical perspective on the boys would be “objective,” removed from the temptations and emotionality of the daily efforts to control and care for the delinquent boys. This objectivity paired with their psychotherapeutic expertise allowed the clinical staff members epistemological access to the “real” reasons for a boy’s behavior that could not be apprehended by the layman—the teacher, the child care worker, the cottage parent, and so on.

Still, the mundane work of educating, caring for, managing, and even punishing the boys needed to be done, and doing these things—and doing them well—requires mastery of a variety of skills, as well as practical knowledge. While the Farm’s leadership recognized the need for these skills and this practical knowledge, they clearly gave them a lower status within the overall scheme of the Farm’s efforts to treat disturbed youth. It was, for example, the psychotherapeutic experts who were responsible for retraining and training the rest of the staff, making sure the staff’s practices were consistent with therapeutic efforts. And it was the cultivation and expansion of this expert psychotherapeutic knowledge that would become an organizational priority during the latter half of the twentieth century, when the Farm added more social workers, clinical staff members, a research department, a training institute, and so on—all roles with limited contact with and little direct control over the boys. The underlying assumption to all of this is that the knowledge created by and the understanding of these experts is somehow more central to the official purposes of the Farm than the work of the direct care staff.

Leaving aside the many broader historical and cultural reasons for why this happened and when it did, it is important to come away from this limited historical record with some sense of the contours of the Farm's division of cognitive labor and the imbalance of power therein. If the historical record is rather silent about the dynamics within this division of labor, then it is my hope that the contemporary experience of Berkshire Farm gives some voice to these concerns. In the next section, I explore the gap between the psychotherapeutic ideals of the administration and clinical staff on the one hand, and the actual demands of the day-to-day practices of running a facility like Berkshire Farm. In doing so, I hope to show that this organization thinks about the problem of treating delinquent boys in very different ways that somehow need to work together.

The Problems of Therapy and Control

If one speaks with the Farm's administrators or clinical staff, one hears heart-wrenching stories of abuse and neglect, tales of hurt little boys in grown men's bodies, struggling to find their place in a world that has, so far, abandoned them. They speak of young men coming to their offices,¹³ opening up to them, crying, revealing painful emotional scars. They speak of forging strong emotional bonds with these young men, helping them move on from their past and maybe even make something of themselves.

If one speaks with the Farm's direct care staff—the teachers or the child care workers—one hears a very different story. They are not insensitive to the boys' emotional struggles, but they refuse to see them as helpless victims. They speak of choices and consequences. They speak of the potential threat some of the boys pose to them and to the other boys. They talk about the

¹³ This applies not just to the clinical staff members. Administrators also had some direct contact with some of the boys. They might take a shine to particular boys and develop a kind of intimate, pseudo-therapist-type connection with the boys as well.

need for “respect” from the boys, about the need to get them to fall into line and cooperate with their orders and expectations.

Neither of these perspectives is complete. Both are shaped by not only the training and whatever professional habits of mind the staff members bring to the table, but also by their day-to-day experiences and responsibilities at work. Both perspectives are ultimately concerned with the behavior of the boys, but they draw on different facts and different theories about that behavior. What follows is an account of each of these perspectives, and the facts and theories that inform them.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Every boy who arrives at Berkshire Farm initially spends about a month at the “intake cottage.” During this time, the boy’s behavior—from the clothes he wears (Is he ‘representing’ a gang’s colors?) to whether or not he can make his bed, to how he gets along with other boys and staff members—will be scrutinized by a variety of staff members. He will receive an educational assessment, a substance abuse assessment, and a clinical evaluation. He will also meet with staff members from the Farm’s recreation program, its vocational program, and even its religious/spiritual program. The intake cottage social workers will also collect from the various State agencies and related organizations (such as other residential programs or mental hospitals) whatever paperwork they have on the boy. The social worker then must take all of these evaluations, all of these various pieces of information, and all of these pieces of paper and expertly sift through them to come up with an appropriate *Initial Treatment Plan*. At the end of the month in the intake cottage, various members of the social work and clinical staff sit down with the boy and his parent or guardian to discuss this Initial Treatment Plan.

There are several aspects of the Initial Treatment Plan that are worth pointing out. First, as part of this intensive evaluation, every boy receives a mental health diagnosis based on the criteria of the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)*.¹⁴ One of the most common diagnoses for the boys at the Farm is the rather vague catch-all “Conduct Disorder,” which the *DSM-IV* defines as “a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate social norms or rules are violated.” However, one also sees various mood disorders (Dysthymic Disorder, Depression, etc.) as well. Usually, any environmental factors (“Absence of father figure; Parental Abandonment; Early separation from biological mother”) and relevant cognitive impairments and medical conditions are also mentioned in the classification.

When I questioned why all of the boys at Berkshire Farm received a mental health diagnosis, the social work and clinical staff members pointed to several factors. First, there were external pressures. Grant-funding agencies and even health management organizations often required organizations like Berkshire Farm to classify their population in this way. Second, it served internal organizational purposes. One social worker from the intake cottage explained to me that the idea of a mental health diagnosis is a bit misleading. Conduct Disorder, for example, is not necessarily a pathology that excuses the boy from the responsibility of his behavior. Diagnosis and the resulting classification are tools for the organization in treating the boy. Finally, the goal, this social worker claimed, was to help the boy overcome this diagnosis. By labeling and identifying the problem, the staff hoped to help the boy recognize his problem and

¹⁴ The *DSM-IV* uses a five axis system to evaluate and classify the mental health of an individual. Under Axis I are listed clinical disorders besides mental retardation and personality disorders (such as schizophrenia, mood disorders, etc.). Under Axis II, mental retardation and personality disorders (such as Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder) are listed. Axis III covers general medical conditions. Axis IV covers all “psychosocial” and environmental factors. Axis V is the “Global Assessment of Functioning Scale,” which ranks an individual’s ability to handle stress and relationships on a one hundred point scale.

develop the skills necessary to overcome the diagnosis (that is, change the patterns of behavior that lead to the diagnosis). The diagnosis and classification thus signal slightly different things to several audiences at once. They legitimize and make recognizable the efforts of Berkshire Farm to external sources. They trigger particular sets of organizational actions and open particular organizational resources to the individual. And perhaps most significantly, they indicate to the boy and his family the official interpretation of his behavior.

A second aspect of this Initial Treatment Plan related to the official diagnosis and classification is a kind of “unfolding” (Knorr-Cetina 1999) of the various details of the boy’s life and the subsequent psychotherapeutic interpretation of those details. Each boy and his family would receive an official “Assessment of Life Areas” document during the Initial Treatment Plan meeting. This document included an assessment (by various staff members) of the boy in fourteen different categories: family relations, interpersonal/social relations, developmental life skills, education, vocational/employment/income, physical health, mental health, recreation/leisure time/spiritual, housing/environment/community, legal, safety/risk, alcohol/substance abuse, relapse prevention, and HIV education. These fourteen categories were then further broken down into “strengths/protecting factors” and “need/safety risk.”¹⁵ At face value, many of these categories would seem to be largely unrelated to concerns of therapy and treatment; however, an examination of how the staff members fill out the documents quickly reveals otherwise.

¹⁵ At the time of my observations, the Farm’s administration had begun moving away from the “pathology model” of mental health, to a “strength-based model.”

The case of Elijah M,¹⁶ a seventeen-year-old boy from New York City who was referred to the Farm as a PINS case by the social service agency that had taken him from his drug-addict mother, is a somewhat typical case, revealing of the nature of these documents. For example, under the “family relations” category and under the “strengths/protecting factors” is listed the following: “Elijah respects his maternal grandmother and is willing to follow her rules. Ms. M—maternal grandmother—is concerned about Elijah’s substance abuse and safety. Elijah loves his siblings. Elijah is concerned for his mother and loves her.” In the “need/safety risk” is listed the following:

Elijah needs to discuss how his father’s crime and his incarceration have affected him.

Elijah needs to express and identify his feelings associated with mother’s abandonment of responsibility to parent him and her substance abuse.

Elijah needs to identify and verbalize his feelings concerning his brother’s substance abuse and mental illness.

Elijah and his grandmother need to learn to negotiate and communicate expectations effectively.

Elijah needs to follow rules and expectations on a consistent basis.

Elijah’s mother is apparently caring for his youngest sibling. CPS [Child Protective Services] has been unable to investigate due to inability to locate mother. BFC [Berkshire Farm Center] staff need to monitor and report concerns to ACS [Administration of Child Services] and CPS. Elijah needs to discuss his feeling regarding this.

Interestingly, Elijah’s family problems are primarily framed in terms of his emotional reactions to them. This official assessment suggests that the root of Elijah’s problem—that is, the behavior that got him to Berkshire Farm—lies in his inability to verbalize his emotions regarding the most tragic and traumatic aspects of his life. These various kinds of details are plucked from the paperwork from other organizations and agencies, as well as conversations with other professionals, family members, and the boys themselves; however, these details are imbued with

¹⁶ The name has been changed.

significance insofar as their potentially disturbing emotional impact on the boy can be inferred. In the psychotherapeutic model of human behavior, such emotional disturbances are assumed to have a causal relationship—whether directly or indirectly—to the boys’ delinquent behavior.

One can see this logic in other “life areas” on the form. For example, in the “interpersonal/social relations,” the “needs” section includes: “Elijah needs to participate in individual/group counseling to help him address his low self-esteem. Elijah needs to participate in individual/group counseling to aid him in making better decisions.” Mention of “low self-esteem” and “better decision-making” is actually a pretty generic description of most of the boys at Berkshire Farm from the perspective of the clinical staff and the administration. One administrator explained: “Love and self-esteem are precursors to achievement and developing competency. Once the boys develop self-esteem and feel accepted and loved in a nurturing environment, they are more prepared to deal with the trauma that got them here.” The underlying assumptions are not only that emotionally disturbing experiences drive delinquent behavior, but that purposefully cultivated positive emotional experiences are necessary to correct those emotional disturbances, and thus the problematic behavior. Thus being able to identify significant negative emotional experiences is only half of the equation; the other half is being able to provide a positive kind of emotional experience.

This leads to the third significant feature of the Initial Treatment Plan—namely, the recommendations for treatment. Generally, there are two major options for therapy or counseling: group or individual. Every boy at the Farm is prescribed some kind of group counseling as part of his Initial Treatment Plan. Individual counseling is generally reserved for those with more serious mental health issues, traumatic or abusive experiences, and so on. However, there are also different types of counseling that might be prescribed based on the boy’s

specific problems, such as substance abuse counseling, grief counseling, and so on. Most of the counseling is done within the cottages. Some “groups” are run by experienced child care workers (though these usually involve practical and less personal matters), but those with more emotionally charged content—such as grief counseling, drug counseling, etc.—are run by clinically trained social workers. Individual counseling is usually done by clinically trained social workers or the psychologists or psychiatrists within the Farm’s clinical department. It is in these contexts that the skilled social worker or clinician is supposed to help the boys “deal with” their negative emotions, as well as provide an emotionally supportive environment.

The fact that work of counseling, whether group or individual, takes place outside of the mundane context of life at Berkshire Farm is significant. One Berkshire Farm psychologist explained:

What my department is looking to do is to have a balance, where the work that I do should be different and not related to the work that is happening at the cottage. Though it should be consistent—it doesn’t mean inconsistent—so that I should be approaching the problem from a very different position. In the cottage, the problem is approach by: “These are the rules. You will follow them. You will be consequenced [sic] if you don’t, and this is what happens.” I let them know I am not an agent of social control. I am not the police. I don’t work in the cottages. I would like to see them do what they are supposed to do to follow program, but that is not my first priority. And so the alliance, the relationship I have with them is quite different than his cottage staff, who has to take on a very different stance than myself. And that allows me the luxury to really explore with the kid—“How do you feel? What are you feeling?” He can really explore with me.

Therapy does not merely stand outside of the realm of behavioral control; its success seemingly depends on it. Without the threat of consequences for behaviors and attitudes that might otherwise be proscribed, the boy will presumably “open up” to his therapist.¹⁷ Thus, he might not only reveal facts about his experience (external or internal) that other staff members might not

¹⁷ The premium on perceived honesty on the part of the boys in this process cannot be understated. For example, in Elijah M’s Assessment, the fact that he freely admitted that he would return to his drug use after leaving Berkshire Farm was listed as both a “strength” and a “need.” While this is obviously a problematic admission (hence it was understood to be a need), it was considered a strength because he was honest with the counselor.

have access to (and which might be relevant to understanding and treating his behavior), but he will presumably experience a sense of emotional intimacy and security, which will aid in the treatment process.

For the social workers, the psychologists, the psychiatrists, and even the higher level administrators, who occasionally engage the boys in similarly limited but intimate settings, these experiences give them access to an entirely different perspective on the boy and his behavior than staff members who might have more frequent but less emotionally intimate contact with the boys; they also tend to see these counseling experiences emotionally engaging and often deeply rewarding personally. Moreover, the boys themselves often act differently toward them than they do toward the other staff members who must enforce the rules. So not only do the broader cultural context and the specific organizational power structure of Berkshire Farm give the words and interpretations of these experts in the psychotherapeutic approach greater authority, but their day-to-day phenomenological experience of these delinquent boys tends to reinforce the significance of emotions and intimately gained revelations in the “real” work of treatment. The obvious concern in this arrangement is that the work of therapy, as emotionally engaging and satisfying as it might be, could become decoupled from the boys’ actual behavior in the rest of their lives. After all, the boys spend the vast majority of their time outside of the intimate confines of therapy.

The Problem of Control

If the intimate setting of therapy is a “luxury,” then we might consider the attendant view of the boys as primarily in need of love and self-esteem a privilege of that setting. Emphasis on

past experiences and deeply held, if unexpressed, emotions can belie the more immediate concerns of managing a population of delinquent, adolescent boys. The dangers these boys pose to staff members and each other is very real. For example, handing out cans of soda as a minor reward for following rules and good behavior—a common, seemingly innocuous practice when I first started at the Farm—was banned after some boys began putting full cans in socks and using them as weapons.

In fact, during my time at Berkshire Farm, there was a particularly serious incident in which five boys ganged up on one, beating him so severely that he was hospitalized with very serious injuries.¹⁸ Among the Farm’s staff, rumors abound as to why this happened. Some said it was “a gang thing.” Some said it was over a pair of sneakers. Some said it was about drugs. Some said there were drugs in the boy’s sneakers. One veteran staff member told me that he saw it coming. The cottage where it had happened had been understaffed for a while. The child care workers who were working there were putting in 60 to 70 hours a week to cover all the shifts, as well as to collect on the available overtime.

This kind of extreme incident is rare, but it reveals the potential danger in the work of Berkshire Farm and the need for supervision and control. Many of the problematic behaviors that got these boys to the Farm in the first place carry over into their lives at Berkshire Farm. The suddenly very structured life of the Farm can come to a shock to a boy who hasn’t been to school in years, has had little if any supervision at home, and is not accustomed to having to listen to adults tell him what to do. Being thrown into a mix of similarly experienced young men can be even more problematic. A boy might find himself in the same cottage or classroom with a rival

¹⁸ One staff member told me that as the State Police were hauling the perpetrators away, one of them asked if this meant that he would lose his upcoming home visit privileges. The magnitude of what he had just done seemed to escape him at the moment.

gang member; the code of the streets might drive some boys to think they have something to prove to the others. Admittedly, most days, the incidents are few and not that severe—a boy is escorted out of a class, a child care worker intervenes in a shoving match in the common room, or a staff member physically restrains a boy having a tantrum. Nonetheless, maintenance of control over this population at any one moment is important *for the work of the Farm to get done*, whether it is in the cottage, in the cafeteria, on the basketball court, or in the classroom.

It is at this level, at the ground level, where the direct care staff (I am focusing primarily on teachers and child care workers) experience Berkshire Farm. The direct care staff rarely enjoys the luxury of one-on-one intimate discussions with the boys. Most of their time is spent occupying the attention of a classroom of ten to twelve, or a portion of the cottage's twenty-five boys. There is often very little time for individualized, understanding responses. The immediate concern of maintaining control—in order to do the job of educating the boys, engaging them in recreation or a group, etc.—often necessitates a consistent, general response of immediate consequences for inappropriate behavior. As a result, the work of the direct care staff necessarily involves looking at a different set of facts with a different understanding of the boys' problematic behaviors.

While not completely irrelevant, concern about traumatic experiences, deep-seated emotional disturbance, or even particular mental health diagnoses is largely muted by the problem of dealing with behavior in the immediate context of the classroom, the cottage, and so on. The teachers and the child care workers must consider the boys in terms of how disruptive or cooperative they are in relation to the controlled dynamics of the group. This means paying attention to posturing, bullying, intimidation, threats, moods, criticisms, sarcastic comments, petty disputes, real or imagined slights, potential gang conflicts, and so on. These various factors,

as well as the groups themselves, are always in flux, so managing a group of delinquent boys often demands a kind of pragmatic *in situ* knowledge that resists articulation, let alone standardization.¹⁹

There are several important tactical²⁰ puzzles in managing a group. First and foremost is the question of when and how often one exerts direct control on the group. By direct control, I mean enforcing the rules of behavior, formal or informal; this could mean merely chastising someone, or it could mean doling out punishments (such as lowering someone's "points" in the Farms merit/demerit system, taking away a privilege, etc.), or it could even mean physically controlling someone (while hitting was strictly forbidden, the physical restraint and the physical removal of disruptive boys from a classroom or cottage area was relatively common). Using too much and using too little direct control can both be counterproductive. A teacher or child care worker who is always coming down on his or her charges comes across as petty and rigid, and thus risks instilling a combative dynamic between the staff and the boys. Conversely, a teacher or child care worker who fails to step in is very likely to eventually lose control of the group. Finding the balance between the two extremes poses an ongoing challenge (one that some teachers and child care workers obviously had problems with).

Related to this problem is the second tactical puzzle—namely, earning the boys' "respect." Because constantly exercising direct control of behavior is impractical, direct care staff member rely heavily on the cooperation of the boys. One gains this cooperation through the somewhat vague though frequently invoked notion of "respect." There seemed to be several

¹⁹ This is perhaps why it is not uncommon for people in these kinds of positions to talk about getting a "feel" for a group or sensing the group's "mood"—or some other vague metaphor for what might be a unconscious attunement to these myriad factors.

²⁰ Here I am invoking the difference between strategy and tactic. Strategy refers to a long-term plan or objective, while tactics are short-term techniques for engaging with a problem.

ways available ways of going about gaining respect. For example, physical size or perceived strength—being seen as an imposing physical force—can help motivate many boys to listen to what one has to say, but that is not very common, especially among the teachers. Many of the child care workers also had very similar backgrounds to many of the boys (i.e. they were black, from inner city neighborhoods, and had been involved in crime and the criminal justice system). Some claimed that these shared identities and experiences earned these men the respect of the boys; some boys certainly would speak about “real” or “cool” child care workers, who seemed to understand where they were coming from better. Others, however, pointed out that these shared identities and experiences were not only unnecessary, but potentially problematic, in that a staff member could get “mixed up” with the boys (not only their politics, but even their budding criminal operations, as was the case of one child care worker caught smuggling in contraband for a boy).

For many of the Farm’s teachers, who were mostly older and white, such an identity-based connection was not available to them. For many of the teachers, gaining and maintaining the student’s respect seemed to be a losing battle for a variety of reasons. Some claimed that the make-up of the Farm’s population had been changing over the years, drifting away from “regular delinquent kids” to more boys with more serious mental health concerns. Others pointed to the cultural/institutional barriers—namely, that many of the boys were now arriving with no ingrained sense of respect for the position of teacher. Given the semi-regular nature of classroom disruptions on any given school day, one could certainly sympathize as to why many (though not all) teachers felt this way.

When these child care workers and teachers invoke the notion of respect, they are expressing their concern about what it means to be a legitimate authority in the eyes of the boys.

The boys' identities, cultural scripts, or even mental health issues certainly can all impact how they perceive child care workers or teachers, but they are not completely determinative. As one veteran teacher, with over twenty years of experience, claimed: "If you respect them, if you show that you respect them as people, then they will respect you." In other words, a child care worker or teacher's actions, not just their ascribed identities or qualities, matter in perception.

This leads us to the third tactical puzzle in managing group—namely, fairness. Fairness really ties together the first two puzzles in managing the group; one must learn to apply the Farm's various behavioral rules and rewards in a manner that is seen as consistent and fair in order to earn the respect, and thus the cooperation of the boys. Teachers or child care workers who let small things build up over the course of the day, and then lash out against one boy for some infraction are likely to be seen as being unfair and unpredictable. While some boys might object to be called out on any rule violation (especially when they first arrive at the Farm), enforcing the rules for all the boys in a predictable, even impersonal manner structures the environment in a way that makes other activities—like learning how to read, have a group discussion, play a basketball game and so on—possible and safe. Thus the direct care staff saw anything that prevented them from enforcing the rules in a fair and consistent manner as undermining their legitimacy in the eyes of the boys. Most often the culprit was the administration and the clinical staff.

Many of the direct care staff expressed their dissatisfaction with the "nurturing" approach of the administration and the clinical staff. Many direct care staff members—teachers and child care workers alike—believed the administration was "too child-centered" and too often "takes a boy's word over theirs." Some of this could certainly be attributed to typical griping about management any organization experiences (as one teacher put it: "There are some people who

would complain whatever the administration did.”), but the differences in approaches had practical consequences. For example, one veteran teacher complained:

It used to be that if a kid fought in class, it would be an automatic suspension. Now one week, I will send a kid out of a class for fighting and he will get in trouble, but the next week I will send a different kid for the same exact thing and fifteen minutes later, after he had ‘talked it over,’ he will be back in the classroom. How does that make me look?

When a boy needs to be escorted out of a classroom for being disruptive or even violent, it would not be unusual for him to have an in-depth personal conversation with the principal, headmaster, or other school administrator. These administrators, well-versed in the language and ideals of the psychotherapeutic, would talk about “what’s really going on” with the boy—that is, they would look for deeper emotional and biographical explanations for his current behavior. That boy might be feeling particularly irritable that day because he just found out that his mother lost custody of him or that he has switched medications or some other emotionally straining event.

After “talking it out,” the administrators might feel that they have a satisfactory understanding of why the boy was disruptive and do not necessarily think that whatever standard punishment applies to the boy. In essence, the administrator considers circumstances and emotional phenomena largely outside of the immediate situation in her perception of the boy’s behavior, while the teacher focuses on the behavior, its relation to the group, and the integrity of the rules and expectations within the immediate situation. When the administrator sends the boy back to the classroom, she has not only undercut the authority of the teacher’s decision to apply the rule, but also the teacher’s ability to maintain the perception of fairness. Providing “understanding” would seem to supersede the need for control and authority over the group.

This conflict of visions runs deeper, however. The perspective of therapy and the demands of control also split on philosophical anthropology—that is, they understand how

human beings “work” in fundamentally different ways. The clinical staff and administration were comfortable employing a highly deterministic model of human beings. In their view, the boys’ behavior was product of their social environment, their broken families, and the resulting cognitive and emotional impairments; moreover, it was through the therapeutic understanding and techniques informing Berkshire Farm’s practices that would change the boys’ behavior. In my conversations with staff members of all levels, I would ask them what was success and failure for the boys at Berkshire Farm. What was revealing about the answers from the administrators and clinical staff is that they tended to deflect talk of the boys failing. One administrator put it: “Every boy is a success, or has the potential for success. No boy at Berkshire Farm is a failure. If a boy fails, it is because the Farm has failed him. This is what this place is about—serving the needs of these boys. The boys don’t fail. We fail them.” While they might speak about the boys’ “participation in their own treatment” when talking about the boys’ successes, they framed the boys’ failures as due to a flaw in their own efforts, understandings, or practices. Certainly, there is an element of rhetorical flourish in this kind of talk. However, in social services, it is easy to see how assumptions about human nature are intimately tied to assumptions about the nature of the work. Work concerned with accessing and shaping deeper motivations of human behavior necessarily requires a view of human beings as largely pliable to external efforts.

The direct care staff with whom I spoke seemed to have no qualms in talking about the boys failing. They tended to use talk about boys who did not “buy into the program” or did not “take advantage of the many opportunities” at the Farm. While the direct care staff certainly understood that most of the boys at Berkshire Farm behaved the way they did because of where they grew up, how they were raised, or even because they had psychological problems, they

recognized a greater degree of moral agency in the boys. If the boys could succeed at the Farm, then they could also fail. Regardless of whatever got them to the Farm, they still faced the choice of whether or not they would go along with the program that day, take advantage of the opportunities the Farm gave them, cooperate with the staff, and so on. The work of the direct care staff rests on the boys' participation, so it is perhaps no surprise that their philosophical anthropology concedes more ground to human unpredictability and agency.

Significant Differences

It is important not to overstate the differences and tensions between the administration and clinical staff, on the one hand, and the direct care staff, on the other. First, like any organization, Berkshire Farm faces a complex web of tensions and differences of opinion and practice. There are tensions within cottages, among cottages, between teachers and child care workers, and so on; there are differences among social workers, between clinical staff and administration, between veteran staff members and new arrivals, and so on. Second, it is important to note that the administration and clinical staff recognize the perspective and the importance of the work of the direct care staff, and vice versa. It would not be unusual to hear a direct care staff member talk about a boy's emotions, mental health diagnosis, or traumatic upbringing, nor would it be unusual to hear an administrator or clinical staff member talk about the importance of safety and consequences. What I hope I have demonstrated in consideration of both the historical and ethnographic data is that the identified difference between therapy and control is firmly rooted in Berkshire Farm's division of labor. As such, the different roles within the organization create different experiences of the boys, require attention to different kinds of facts, and gain traction through fundamentally different theories of human behavior. So while there might be some mutual recognition of these differences across these roles, I would argue that

the structure of the work necessarily leaves epistemological gaps. Talking about a spectrum between therapy and control mindsets, for example, would be misleading; expressed sympathies are not the same as responding to the socially organized structural requirements of one's experience and role responsibilities.²¹

These significant differences should lead us to a several questions. If there is a deep tension if not contradiction between the understanding of therapy and the demands of control, then why doesn't an organization like Berkshire Farm come grinding to a halt? Or perhaps, why hasn't the therapeutic perspective favored by the administration and the more powerful members of the organization effectively silenced other understandings? How has Berkshire Farm been so apparently successful as an organization for so long if its parts seem to understand the organization's work in such different ways? Situations like this push us to examine how coordination without consensus is possible.

A traditional explanation might point to the obviously hierarchical arrangement of Berkshire Farm's authority structure. The administration and the clinical staff members clearly have say over the direct care staff; their understanding and explanation of the work of the Farm should win out when push comes to shove. While this explanation has some truth to it (as evidenced by the example of the administrator who overturns a teacher's punishment of a disruptive students), it fails to take into account the fact that the work of Berkshire Farm ultimately depends on both therapy and control. Without a population under control, the "luxury" of group or individual therapy cannot happen. Without the ultimate therapeutic and rehabilitative

²¹ A teacher who suddenly stops teaching a class to have a deeply personal conversation with one of her students or a psychologist who suddenly seems bent on punishing a boy who has confessed transgressions within the confines of therapy would not only be shirking their primary responsibilities, but might even be considered to be acting against the ethical requirements of their position.

purposes of the Farm, efforts to keep the boys in line become largely meaningless to the outside world, where the legitimacy of the therapeutic ethos reigns. We might say that the administration/clinical staff and the direct care staff are in a state of *mutual interdependence*, but *permanent disagreement*. The therapeutic ideals cannot dominate to the exclusion of the demands of control; therefore, the demands and understandings of control must be given some room within the organization.

Practical Overlap

Upon her arrival at Berkshire Farm in 1995, Executive Director Rose Washington attempted to address the divide between therapy and control. Before, each cottage had a cottage manager and an assigned member of the clinical staff (usually a clinical social worker), whose office was not necessarily in the cottage. The former was responsible for managing behavior in the cottage; the latter was only responsible for treatment. Washington commented: “You can imagine the twain often did not meet.” Her goal was to bridge the gap between behavior management and treatment because “behavior is often a red flag for a treatment need, so you cannot treat them separately.” To do so, she restructured the Farm’s organization slightly, placing more clinical staff members in the cottages themselves and giving the cottage managers more clinical responsibilities. Together, “they were all responsible for the [boys’] treatment needs.” This change meant more as well as qualitatively different responsibilities for the cottage staff members, from the cottage manager down to the child care workers. This organizational restructuring is an explicit attempt to create an overlap in practices, which can obviously facilitate the coordination of the different communities of practice.

The social workers placed in the cottages were known as Team Leaders, and Assistant Team Leaders. They have a combination of clinical and administrative responsibilities. They hold one-on-one meetings with the boys, they run groups, and give out referrals to the Farm's clinical services. They also oversee the cottage's childcare staff, handle complaints from the staff and the boys, and deal with issues of discipline. They engage in therapy and believe in its efficacy, but by being in the cottages, they have a better sense of the kind the day-to-day issues of discipline and control than they would if they were in a separate office. For example, the Team Leader of the Intake Cottage described to me how she thinks about assigning a boy to a cottage. She explained that she takes into consideration not just the diagnosis, but practical concerns as well. If she knows of a cottage where the staff are letting a large boy bully or "police" the rest of the boys, then she sends a larger, confident boy to that cottage to act as an equalizer. She also avoids sending smaller, younger boys to cottages that she thinks are struggling with control issues. She believed taking into account these different types of considerations allowed for the boys to receive better care during their time at Berkshire Farm. While the Executive Director may have initially placed social workers in the cottages to make the cottages more therapeutic, the demands of practice also appeared to have worked in the other direction as well. There was some sense in which these members of the clinical staff became better understanding of the issues of control.

This organizational restructuring also affected the work of the direct care staff. One of Executive Director's expressed reasons for instituting these changes is that she understood the behavior that the child care workers dealt with as a potential source of information for the clinical staff members. So while the work of managing and controlling the boys is necessary for the overall organization to function, it does not mean that the staff members doing this work

cannot be enlisted into serving the therapeutic purposes of Berkshire Farm. The key is to do so in a way that does not entirely disrupt the practices necessary for control to be maintained. This is where the Berkshire Model of Care and Treatment comes in.

Setting Standards: The Berkshire Model of Care and Treatment

Throughout Berkshire Farm's history, the direct care staff members have had the primary responsibility of enforcing Berkshire Farm's behavior management system. From the beginning, Berkshire Farm has had some system of rules, rewards, and punishments. Traditionally, this was a system with some kind of merits and demerits for good or bad behavior. Higher levels of merits earned the boys rewards and privileges; too many demerits usually meant the loss of privileges or other punishments. For the direct care staff, having a clearly articulated system of rewards and punishments makes their jobs easier. The system helps keep the boys in line (through either positive or negative reinforcement); moreover, it helps the direct care staff establish conditions of fairness that help to give their authority over the boys some legitimacy. Throughout the Farm's history, however, administrations have attempted to tweak these behavior management systems in various ways—sometimes in response to practical problems and other times in response to a deeper change in administrative philosophy (e.g. in earlier days, considering a previous form of punishment “too harsh”, or more recently, considering some practice counter to therapeutic goals). During my time at Berkshire Farm, the administration was in the middle of making yet another such change to the behavior management system, rolling out the Berkshire Model of Care and Treatment (BMCT) in several of the eleven total cottages.

BMCT was a behavior management system developed by the clinical staff intended to complement the administration's new treatment philosophy. The BMCT's key difference from

the behavioral management system in place was that it was intended to have more focus on “positive reinforcement.” Instead of merely deducting points for objectionable behaviors and doling out punishments, BMCT emphasized awarding points for performing particular “positive” behaviors, leading to privileges and rewards. The system was supposed to work in the following manner. The clinical staff had developed a large number of “treatment skills” that many of the boys at the Farm are lacking (e.g. “following instructions,” “disagreeing appropriately,” “self-talk,” “accepting criticisms,” etc.). Every week, the clinician would then assign each boy several “target skills” for him to work on. Each boy was required to carry with them at all times an official sheet of paper that indicated these target skills, as well as how they should go about practicing these skills. Each boy was expected to practice these skills in front of all staff members (though most of their time was with direct care staff) in order to receive points for their efforts. When the staff members observed a boy practicing one of these skills, he or she was supposed to mark it on the boy’s official form so that they boy could receive his points. These points could be “banked” into an account; eventually, the boys could use these points to purchase items, such as board games or food from the “cottage store” or even privileges, like an off-ground field trip.

Accompanying this program were more responsibilities and expectations of the direct care staff, especially the child care workers (though teachers were expected to participate eventually as well). The BMCT required the staff to interact with the boys more frequently, to pay more attention to the things the boy was doing right (not just what he was doing wrong), and to fill out more paperwork. In addition to these responsibilities were expectations about *how* the staff were to conduct themselves in their interactions with the boys. One psychologist explained these expectations to me: “It is about comportment. It is about the staff changing their own

behavior, their approach... The problem is they are relying on control instead of influence. What we are trying to do with the Berkshire Model of Care and Treatment is to get them to influence the kids, not control them.” In the view of the administration and the clinical staff, the way the direct care staff conduct themselves with the boys is integral to the treatment process. For the direct care staff, behavior management no longer meant simple, consistent enforcement of the rules, keeping a check on misbehavior. The BMCT’s changes meant that they had to talk with the boy about what he did wrong and what he should do better next time. Confrontations were supposed to be turned into “teachable moments.” Moreover, they had to praise, encourage, and reward behaviors that they once just expected of the boys.

The BMCT, like other behavioral management programs before it, represents an official standard of practice for the direct care staff set by the administration and the clinical staff. The BMCT attempts to prescribe how the staff are to interact with the boys, comport themselves, and so on. In other words, it is an attempt to *standardize their methods of work*. Importantly, the purpose of this method standardization is not necessarily consistent with the immediate demands of control, *per se* (e.g. it is not necessarily about fairness). Instead, the methods of interacting with the boys are being standardized for a therapeutic purpose.

The BMCT orients the staff’s efforts around the paperwork and the boys themselves. The paperwork does not necessarily *mean* the same thing to the clinical and direct care staff members. Certainly, the direct care staff member can find and record information in the paperwork that is important for his or her immediate purposes (e.g. finding out that a boy has trouble managing his anger, or that he has recently begun losing more points more frequently). However, it is the clinical staff and the administration that set the language and the categories of the paperwork. For them, that a direct care staff member can make some sense of the paperwork

for his or her purposes is secondary to the fact that the paperwork (in conjunction with the BMCT methods) serves therapeutic and administrative purposes.

Importantly, I do not want to paint too much of a sanguine portrait of BMCT. At the time of my field work, less than half of the cottages were using the BMCT, and several had allegedly tried and given up on it. Many of the child care workers with whom I spoke expressed skepticism, if not cynicism, toward the administration's new behavioral management system. Many saw the BMCT as "soft" because it seemed to call for less harsh punishments and consequences for misbehavior; moreover, they found the added therapeutic responsibilities burdensome, if not inconsistent with the demands of their jobs. As one childcare worker put it bluntly: "I wonder what Miss Washington would do if she was being called a 'fucking cocksucker' all day by some of these boys like we are. I wonder how easy it would be to want to sit down and talk with them." Despite these objections, the administration had set a date for the BMCT to be instituted in all the cottages and throughout the treatment center, including the school. Indeed, Berkshire Farm currently proclaims that the BMCT is there "treatment philosophy."²²

Discussion: Spheres of Authority and the Problem of Coordination

Judging from both the archival material and my conversations with longtime Berkshire Farm staff members, changing the behavioral management system, as well as the related therapeutic programming, seemed to be a semi-regular occurrence. There was some sense that each administration came in and tried to "reinvent the wheel." However, administrations

²² See: http://www.berkshirefarm.org/about_us/Treatment_Philosophy_54_pg.htm (Last accessed on July 19, 2012).

inevitably encountered a tremendous amount of practical inertia. During my time at the Farm, there were many practices and programs in the cottages that were vestiges of not only the previous generation's behavioral management program, but the generation before that (e.g. one cottage still had color-based groups—a practice that came from the behavior management system of the 1980s). In the face of this, veteran members of the direct care staff voiced a kind of practical wisdom that said: “The administration will change, and the programs will change, but my job and the way I approach my job stays the same.”

The evidence suggests that top-down imposition of the therapeutic understanding of the work at Berkshire Farm is never quite complete. The administration and the clinical staff might be able to influence the language the direct care staff use. And the administration and clinical staff may be able to impose standards of interaction and comportment, as well as required paperwork. However, they cannot truly change the *practical* conditions and experiences of the direct care staff—that is, managing the behavior of troubled adolescent boys—that demand practical knowledge (or *metis*) not necessarily captured in rules, standards, or therapeutic theories of human behavior. In other words, there is a gap between official understanding, expectations, and demands, on the one hand, and actual practice, on the other. In this gap, alternative understandings and unofficial knowledge will most likely continue to thrive.

This gap does not prevent these two distinct communities of practice from working together. In fact, one might argue that such a gap allows the organization, with its current configuration of its division of labor, to work. The communities of practice oriented toward therapy and the communities of practice oriented toward the problems of control basically operate in different practical and spatial spheres within the organization. The concerns of the therapeutic ethos are best realized in the isolated confines of the psychiatrist's office or in the

intimacy of a group therapy session. Even within Berkshire Farm's archives we find the explicit disengagement of the therapeutic staff from the day-to-day practical responsibilities of controlling and disciplining the boys. First, there was concern that such responsibilities interfered with the objectivity of the clinicians. Later, the goal was for the clinicians to create a "safe space" for the boys, free from the potentially constraining influence of consequences and judgment. The burden of the mundane responsibilities of discipline and control fell largely on the direct care staff. The child care workers must keep order in the cottages, in the lines, in the cafeteria, and in the recreation center. The teachers must keep order in the classroom. The administration and the clinical staff may try to make these spaces, and the practices therein, more amenable to their own therapeutic purposes, but ultimately, these spaces and practices lay outside their own sphere of pragmatic authority.

Each community of practice—that of therapy and that of control—operates in a distinct sphere of pragmatic authority. This authority is gained through the ongoing engagement of the problems confronted in practice. Any attempt by the administration or clinical staff to change the direct care staff's practices that fails to take into account the practical problem of control is likely to come up short. The issue is not that the administration or clinical staff lacks the power to do so, or that there is insubordination from the direct care staff, but rather that the problem of control consistently intrudes in the practice of running the day-to-day activities of a juvenile delinquent detention center.

What the administration and clinical staff do have in this situation is organizational or managerial authority. They can set the standards to be met, they can determine the procedures that need to be followed and they can create the forms to be filled out. In other words, they have greater authorship over the formal conditions of practical coordination necessary for the

organization to work. Being able to make a child care worker take the time to fill out a boy's official BMCT form is not the same thing as getting the child care worker to buy into the therapeutic value of such practices, but it is still a kind of authority. This organizational authority is what allows the administration and clinical staff to impose, even in a small way, on the practical activity of the direct care staff (and not the other way around).

The fact that Berkshire Farm works despite significant differences in understanding of the central problem is not that much of a surprise once we expand our notions of knowledge and cognition, and subsequently, our understanding of how coordination without consensus is possible. It is not in the organization's interest to eliminate the different understandings, and perhaps more importantly, the different practices that make it work as a whole. The "front stage" therapeutic ideals espoused by the administration and clinical staff put the organization in good standing in the broader field of social services. However, the "backstage" concerns of control—the unpleasant world of fights, forced restraints, discipline, and so on—are still fundamental to what the organization does (Goffman 1959). There is, of course, an inherent danger to such an arrangement. The administrators and clinical staff are essentially in a position where they can be critical of those direct care staff who must take on the problems of discipline and control, all while benefitting from the fruits of those efforts. The gap between therapy and control that allows the organization to work also creates conditions akin to plausible deniability for those with organizational power.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to provide an account of how Berkshire Farm works as an organization despite the fact that its members think about the problem of how to deal with

juvenile delinquents in contradictory ways—namely, in terms of therapy and in terms of control. This presented two interrelated problems. The first is developing a view of collective action that does not rely on a shared understanding of the problem. The second is to account for the persistence of an alternative interpretation of the problem despite the apparent predominance of the interpretation favored by those with organizational power.

To do this, I drew on a wide array research on problems of interpretation and coordination in organizational settings. First, I argued against the deep consensus model collective action for both its reliance on an overly conceptual understanding of knowledge and cognition, as well as its conflation of the problems of interpretation and coordination. By expanding our understanding of knowledge and cognition to include a practical dimension, we can also begin to understand how people might hold different interpretations, but still coordinate in terms of their practical activity. Consistent with this view is the idea that organizational authority stems from the ability to set the formal conditions of practical coordination, rather than the ability to impose a particular interpretation.

Drawing on a combination of archival and ethnographic work, I tried to give an account of how Berkshire Farm works consistent with this theoretical interpretation. With historical material from the archives, I showed how administrators and therapeutically minded clinicians explicitly cultivated a therapeutic understanding and set of practices that were above the fray of the day-to-day concerns of discipline and control. This division of labor contributed to the development of distinct epistemic cultures or communities of practice. I then explored the perspective of therapy favored by the administration and clinical staff and the perspective of control favored by the child care workers and teachers. I then tried to show the ways in which the therapeutic perspective favored by the administration and clinical staff members informs the

formal conditions of coordination, but fails to dominate as an interpretive perspective.

Ultimately, administrators and clinical staff members, on the one hand, and direct care staff, on the other, operate in different spheres of pragmatic authority. The interpretive perspective of the therapeutically-oriented administration and clinical staff cannot prevail in a sphere of practical activity where concerns about control are paramount. What the administration and clinical staff do have is organizational authority, which allows them to set the formal conditions for practical coordination. The direct care staff may need to comply with such official expectations—such as official procedures, paperwork, etc—but that does not mean that they need to truly buy into the official interpretations.

Chapter Three

Agreeing What to Do, But Not Why: Sentencing in a Juvenile Justice System

Introduction

Since its inception in the nineteenth century, the juvenile justice system has been given two public mandates. On the one hand, it is an extension of the existing criminal justice system. It is therefore concerned with ideas of punishment, public safety, due process, and so on. On the other hand, under the notion of *parens patriae*, the juvenile justice system is part of a broader array of social service agencies, including child services, mental health services, and even schools. Therefore, the juvenile justice system is very much concerned with providing resources for economically and socially disadvantaged youth.

Under these two broad mandates, the contemporary juvenile justice “world” is populated by myriad professionals with very different training, experiences, and conceptions of the problem at hand: lawyers, social workers, clinical psychologists, youth workers, administrators, and even teachers. Each group of professionals comes to a youth’s case with different habits of mind and different responsibilities. These specialized roles obligate them focus on particular aspects of the youth—crime, behavior, psychological condition, education, family situation, behavior in the community, and so on—and to become invested in seeing the youth’s failings and challenges through that lens.

This division of labor reflects not so much a technical or natural breakdown of the problems presented by the average case, but a loosely coupled system of perspectives and theories about the nature of youthful criminality and the necessary response to it. The complexity

and messiness of any one case—the ambiguity of the youth’s status as victim and victimizer, the entanglement of causes behind delinquent behavior, and the compounded failures of various social institutions—would suggest that the organizing and coordinating among these specialists presents a tremendous challenge. However, these professionals often do come together to simultaneously define the problem and negotiate its solution. In this sense, organizations within the juvenile justice system stand at institutional cross-roads. Coordinating among these competing and often contradictory understandings of the problem is, to a large degree, routine.

This paper examines one such routine, where professionals with very different understandings of a case, must sit down together and decide the sentence of a court-adjudicated delinquent. Drawing on extensive field notes based on the ethnographic observation of the sentencing meetings for 33 different cases in a state’s juvenile justice system, I show how criteria for distinct sentencing rationales—rationales that offer competing, even contradictory, justifications for a sentence—are consistently applied to the same case, within the same space of the sentencing procedure. The observed sentencing meetings took place in several offices of a state’s Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ).²³ While the state’s juvenile courts determine whether or not a youth is adjudicated delinquent (i.e. guilty), the DJJ determines which program the youth will be sent to and for how long. Once a judge has committed a delinquent to the DJJ, he or she is sent to a *DJJ Assessment Unit* where various staff members gather a host of information about the youth—from his or her crimes, possible gang involvement, and drug use, to his or her family history, educational record, and psychological profile. After about one month, these staff members—an administrator, a psychologically-trained clinician, a social worker, an education specialist, and even a “child care worker” or guard—sit down around a

²³ The name of the state and the agency have been disguised to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the informants.

table with the youth, his or her parent (or guardian, which may be another state agency), and perhaps his or her defense attorney. At this meeting, almost every aspect of this youth's life and adjudicated crimes are discussed in a very structured, turn-taking manner for an hour or two. Then, at the end, the sentence and placement decision will be announced.

Even though the various pieces of the case discussed (e.g. trauma experienced, damage to property, or threat posed to others) represent criteria for different rationales for a sentence (e.g. more time for treatment or incapacitation), there is no attempt to resolve the competing rationales. In other words, there is no clear sense about what a sentence is actually about. The sentence becomes a narrative about all of the things discussed at the same time—concerns about safety, more time for therapy, assigning the right education program, and a necessary punitive response for failures of individual responsibility. Deep agreement about what kind of justice is being served by the sentence need not occur for the sentence to be justifiable. Indeed being able to justify the sentence along multiple rationales may be preferable.

This simultaneous presence of distinct sentencing rationales presents something of a theoretical puzzle: why don't the actors feel compelled to decide what the sentence is *really* about before taking action? How can a sentence be justified by competing, even contradictory logics at the same time? The short answer is: by agreeing what to do, even though there may not be agreement as to why. Understanding how and why such an "incompletely theorized agreement" (Sunstein 1995) is possible requires a more grounded and nuanced understanding of intersubjectivity and the potential loose coupling between individual meaning and coordinated social action. In addition, it demands attending to those features of social life, and particularly organizational life, that sustain these "surface agreements" (Goffman 1959), making on-going practical coordination possible despite of even profound differences in individual understanding.

I argue that it is the ritualized nature of the sentencing procedures and process that sustain those surface agreements. The problems faced in any individual case, like that of Troy Williams, are most often messy moral problems. They invite multiple understandings and explanations, but they resist clear or simple solutions. To a large degree, the various rationales observed sentencing meetings of the DJJ reflect the complexity of these cases; however, there is still the problem of doing *something* about these problems. Ritualized procedure and rationalized rules compel collective action forward, even if it is imperfect, unresolved collective action.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I highlight the key theoretical issues at stake and attempt to build a vocabulary that allows for us to make better sense of what is going on at these sentencing meetings. Next, I present a brief note on the data and methods. I then provide a detailed description of the events of one sentencing meeting. I then break down the various sentencing rationales within that case, pulling in related examples from other cases. Finally, I end with a discussion of how and why these sentences are justified according to competing, even contradictory, logics.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Matter of Agreement

Going into these sentencing meetings at the DJJ, my initial intuition about what would happen is that the various professionals involved would discuss and debate the reasons for a sentence—that is, they would come to some shared sense of what the case was really about. Could someone with severe psychological problems facing relatively minor charges get a longer sentence for therapeutic needs? How much weight would be given to the severity of the crimes,

mitigating or aggravating circumstances, family circumstances, psychological diagnosis, educational deficits or strengths, and so on? While there were certainly some differences of opinion, and even some open debates about a course of action during my observations, these were by far the exception, rather than the rule. Expressed differences in understanding of the case and reasons for a sentence coexisted in the same social space.

My own mistaken intuition was rooted in a common, but questionable understanding of intersubjectivity and its role in coordination or collective action—namely, that a deeply shared understanding of the situation is necessary for legitimate collective action to take place. This intuition assumes several things. First, that a deeply shared understanding among individuals is possible. This is not an unusual assumption. It is, for example, implicit in the “culture as consensus” model deriving from particular interpretations of Durkheim’s work in both sociology and anthropology. Second, it assumes that lack of shared understanding can undermine effective coordination. In other words, differences in understanding can potentially bring collective action to a halt. This assumption assumes that beliefs about or the meaning of an action must precede that action. Third, and related to the second point, it assumes that lack of a shared understanding threatens the legitimacy of the collective action. Any collective action whose meaning is not consented to is probably coerced by either practical contingencies (e.g. “I’ll go along with this for now.”) or authority.

We see a similar model operating in the work of Boltanski and Thevenot (2006), who take on the problem of justifying inequality in a pluralistic society. They argue that when essentially equal beings make such claims they do so by presenting the specific situation as a being in accord with some general principle. In other words, the inequality is justified according to some higher principle; moreover, the other essentially equal beings must agree that this

specific situation falls in line with that general principle. The problem is that in contemporary society that we have multiple principles by which we can justify inequality. This problem of a “plurality of forms of agreement” presents us with two compelling sociological questions:

How is that plurality possible when, as many have noted, universality seems to be a condition of legitimacy? How can persons act and reach agreement even when multiple modalities for agreement seem to obtain? (Boltanski and Thévenot: p 35)

Boltanski and Thévenot suggest that these questions cannot be answered separately, but rather must be taken together. Understanding how people deal with or sort out these competing principles is connected to understanding how such a plurality of principles can coexist.

There are two general possibilities. Either a social, institutional, or organizational context makes it clear which principle or logic of justification applies—a *natural* situation, in the words of Boltanski and Thévenot—or there is disagreement (see also Walzer 1983). The structural pluralism of modern society certainly makes the former possible to some degree, but disagreement is inevitable where institutional and organizational boundaries are not clear, or where actors with a plurality of understandings and claims must come together. In such situations, Boltanski and Thévenot argue: “Since the principles of justice invoked are not immediately compatible, their presence in a single space leads to tensions that have to be resolved if action is to take its normal course” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 216). People involved in these disagreements “may become involved in short-term local and superficial compromises, or they may attempt to negotiate durable agreements that respect the competing worlds in a more integrated way” (Denis, Langley, and Rouleau 2007: 193). In other words, lack of agreement about what principle is at stake is an impediment to legitimate coordinated action. We can have only temporary compromises (e.g. agreeing to disagree) or deep deliberation that brings us to an actual agreement if we are to have successful, legitimate coordinated actions.

My point is not to say that Boltanski and Thevenot's model is wrong. In fact, I think there is a reason my own intuitions going into the field resembled theirs. People acting in a coordinated or collective manner often debate principles and differences in understanding. So how do we account for situations with no apparent debate, where we might expect some level of contention? We do so by taking a different theoretical starting point at the basic terms of intersubjectivity and coordination of action. This alternative model will allow us to explain both the absence and presence of contention; moreover, it is more consistent with theoretical work grounded in the study of actual organizations.

Surface Agreements

While much of the theoretical work done in the microsociological tradition²⁴ focuses on the problem of establishing social order within interactive context, it is Goffman's terminology that is most helpful for the current purposes. Goffman has a very different take on the matter of

²⁴ For the various microsociological traditions, the sheer possibility of communicating meanings and intentions across individual minds presented an enormously complicated puzzle for sociology. For example, both Schutz (1967) and Blumer (1969) emphasize the individual's capacity to recognize a mind or self in another, and through symbolic signifiers, communicate with that other in social interactions. This is what makes society possible, but it is also what makes the problem of establishing social order inherently problematic. This emphasis on the ability to communicate significance and intent with other persons certainly highlights the role individual effort and agency has in the construction and reconstruction of the social order, but it leaves a looming question that Schutz and Blumer are well aware of —namely, how well do we really have to “understand” one another in order to coordinate our actions?

Schutz argues that when we try to understand someone else we end up with “at best an approximation of the sign-user's intended meaning, but never that meaning itself” (1967: p 129). For him, such a state of affairs can be improved upon through intimacy and more communication, but there is little indication about what level of understanding is adequate to coordinate our actions into joint or collective actions. Blumer gives this same problem serious consideration in his revisionist treatment of the sociological problem of order:

The participants may fit their acts to one another in orderly joint actions on the basis of compromise, out of duress, because they may use one another in achieving their respective ends, because it is the sensible thing to do, or out of sheer necessity. In very large measure, society becomes the formation of workable relations (1969: p 76).

Our capacity for joint action is not entirely hindered by conflict, differences in intent, or differences in understanding, as long as we have proper motivation to do so. Still, the conditions under which intersubjective agreement is possible and necessary for joint action to occur are left unexplored.

intersubjective communication and a clear answer for the problem of intersubjective agreement.

It is not necessary for social interaction, and thus society, to work:

Ordinarily the definitions of the situation projected by the several different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another so that open contradiction will not occur. I do not mean that there will be a consensus that arises when each individual expresses what he really feels and honestly agrees with the expressed feelings of the others present. This kind of harmony is an optimistic ideal and in any case not necessary for the smooth working of society. Rather each participant is expected to suppress his immediate feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable. The maintenance of this surface agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service. (Goffman 1959: p 9)

In this view, social interactions call for a “surface agreement,” not a deep or strong sense of intersubjective agreement or consensus. The problem of understanding each other enough to act becomes not about communicating more and more of one’s own understanding, but knowing enough to restrain oneself from communicating too much of one’s opinions, reactions, experiences, or dissent. Such a surface agreement does not just allow us to “agree to disagree” but to act *as if* we do agree.²⁵

The idea of a “surface agreement” immediately structures the relationship between individual meanings and coordination. There is one vague, often thinly established understanding of the situation/interaction on top and below that, the beliefs and understandings of the actors

²⁵ This idea bubbles up again and again in Goffman’s work. In his consideration of “interaction rituals,” he argues that in a spoken interaction, for example, “lulls and interruptions are regulated,” a certain level of “emotional atmosphere” is maintained, and polite accord occurs because “participants who might be in real disagreement with one another give temporary lip service to views that bring them into agreement on matters of fact and principle” (Goffman 1967: p 35). Similarly, when he describes types of “engagements,” he writes that “the problem of maintaining orderly activity will be largely internal to the encounter,” and so issues of time, turn-taking, small talk, the “inhibition of hostility,” and so on, become features and expectations of the encounter itself (Goffman 1963: p 154). Even in his notion of “framing” there is a sense that social interactions cue people into what pieces of information are relevant and permissible to situation at hand (Goffman 1974). The overarching theme is that social interactions themselves—and a whole variety of interactions at that—pave over deeper individual concerns and difference with a thin but meaningful sense that we agree what is going on *in the interaction itself*.

involved, which are largely opaque to each other and may in fact vary tremendously. As long as we can agree at the surface level, *actual agreement* at the deeper level is not necessary for our interaction or joint efforts to succeed.

This idea is both illuminating and unsettling. On the one hand, it provides a clear way out of the dilemma posed by a naïve consensus view of intersubjectivity. We don't have to have a one-to-one shared understanding of the situation in order to bring coherence to our interactions and joint efforts. This is undoubtedly key to making any kind of social order possible. On the other hand, it presents us with the troubling idea that important stakes, problems, issues, and so on, can get suppressed by the surface agreement and the need to get along. It is important to note that it's not that a surface agreement *will* always pave over these deeper issues, but that it *can*. Winship (2004) writes that these "veneers of consensus" are, in fact, often breeched by underlying concerns, thus presenting actors with a "critical moment" to which they may respond by either ignoring it, suppressing it, or redefining the situation at hand. Still, the presumed social cost of violating the normative order established by such a surface agreement is potentially high; moreover, the chances of successfully engaging in a substantive problem that has been intentionally put aside by a group of people are probably very low.

The notion of surface agreement thus does not resolve the problem of intersubjective agreement, but redefines it. It forces us to consider the fact that coordinated social action can involve multiple levels of agreement and meaning. Moreover, it pushes the problem of agreement outside of the individual's effort or ability to communicate his or her subjective experience and into the structure of the situation—that is, into the social world. Local, organizational, or institutional expectations and definitions provide the weight and rigidity of the surface agreement in the social situation. So consideration of whether or not the different

understandings individuals bring to a social situation matter depends on the significance—i.e. weight and rigidity—of the surface agreement established by the nature of the interaction. In more formal social situations where the surface-level meanings are well-established (i.e. have more symbolic significance for those involved), the *responsiveness* of the interaction to the underlying concerns is expectedly stunted. What follows is examination of two such categories of interaction—namely, ritual and formal organizations—where surface-level meanings are well-established.

Rituals, Formal Organization, and the Decoupling of Meaning and Action

Ritual has a long and complicated history within anthropology from the functionalist views of Durkheim (1995) and Radcliffe-Brown (1952) to the interpretative approaches of Turner (1967) or Geertz (1993). A ritual presents the anthropologist with two interrelated theoretical tasks: first, what sense to make of the ritual itself, and second, how to understand the role of that ritual in social life more broadly. Rituals involve sets of prescribed actions whose meanings are handed down by tradition, maintained by experts, and learned by participants. These established meanings, being external to any one individual, can help coordinate the actions of many participants without the need for deep agreement about what is going on. Rituals involving multiple participants then create a particular kind of surface agreement—one richer in symbolic articulation and weight than the everyday interaction, and thus more constraining for those involved. This firm, even rigid surface agreement makes the focus of the ritual *consistency in action* among participants, not *consistency in meaning*. Knowledgeable participation in a ritual involves knowing what to do, not necessarily believing the right thing or the same thing as everyone else. So although rituals may have grander cultural elaborations of their significance,

their power and effectiveness comes through the emphasis on action and practice. A ritual is something to be done.

Some contemporary theoretical accounts of ritual have begun to converge on a similar set of observations—namely, that the “world” the ritual invokes is clearly distinct from actual day-to-day experiences and the world the participants inhabit. Douglas, for example, writes: “Social rituals create a reality which would be nothing without them” (1966: p 63). Smith claims: “Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are” (1987: p 109). Seligman, Weller, Puett, and Simon similarly argue: “The model we propose instead understands ritual as a subjunctive—the creation of an order *as if* it were truly the case. Or, putting it in different words, the subjunctive creates an order that is self-consciously distinct from other possible social worlds” (2008: p 20). For example, a wedding ceremony allows for individuals to gather and celebrate the nuptials *as if* the marriage is a good idea, *even if* every individual does not believe that to be the case. By establishing a distinctive, idealized order within its space and performance, the ritual not only allows individual participants to put aside their differences but also allows them to overlook the potential contradictions the idealized vision of the world poses for their day-to-day experiences. By going along with ritual’s actions, participants reinforce this idealized vision of the world, even if they may not believe it individually. To consider this from another angle, rituals are about *agreed upon action* and not about agreement about meaning in a deeper sense.

Goffman’s notion of surface agreement and the idea of ritual as “subjunctive” social action provide grounds to understand how coordinated social action can occur even in the presence of multiple, varied understandings among the actors involved. Together they suggest that a deep intersubjective agreement among multiple actors is not necessary for successful

coordinated action. In fact, it might be thought of as an impediment to action. This is important to understanding competing substantive claims both within and between organizations and institutions. Modern society has been defined by two seemingly contradictory movements—toward increased rationalization of organized social action and toward an increase in the number of cultural and moral frameworks that coexist in any one society. Our capacity to organize larger and larger swaths of human experience under bureaucratic regimes would seem to be hindered by the diversity of moral understandings present in the social order. Yet stepping back to consider a long observed capacity of human beings to put aside these very substantive concerns to get along with each other and participate in organized action suggests that an increase in formally organized action—those very bureaucratic actions that some have called “irrational” (Weber 1978) or “ritual” (Meyer and Rowan 1975)—facilitates both pluralism and relativism because it fails to truly resolve substantive claims (see Jackall 1994).

In the face of competing moral claims, various interest groups and stakeholders, and a multiplicity of publics, organizations—public or private—are generally better served by not resolving—or at least fully resolving—the myriad substantive claims against them. Should a company maximize profits or “go green”? Should a college institute affirmative action or a merit-based system of admissions? The best answer for the organization is almost always “all of the above” (Cohen and March 1986). Whether this is logically possible or not does not matter as much as the fact that the organization somehow “takes into account” these concerns in the eyes of interested parties. This is where apparently ritualized processes would seem to come into play. Meyer and Rowan (1975) are right in arguing that the merely symbolic “rational” forms of organization serve a legitimating purpose in the eyes of society at large, but what they missed is the capacity of those “rational” rituals to address specific concerns for interested audiences that

make claims on the legitimacy of an organization. Formalized procedures and processes become important not because they address substantive concerns, but because they create a surface agreement in which substantive concerns have been adequately addressed, even if those substantive concerns are irresolvable.

There are important examples of exactly this phenomenon that come from field observations in various organizational settings. Donnellon, Gray, and Bougon (1986) point out that an organization's members often give very different meanings for the same organizational actions. Shared meaning is not necessary as long as organizational members understand their meanings as roughly equivalent. In his still haunting portrait of corporate managers, Jackall notes that "institutionalized paradigms of rationality, technique and procedure tend to become ascendant over substantive reflection about organizational goals" (1989: p 76). This concern with rationality is largely for show, a kind of surface agreement created across a hierarchical organization that diffuses responsibility in the face of the inherent moral ambiguity and uncertainty of the work. There is, in fact, a premium placed on managers who can display "adeptness at inconsistency" in the face of "a multiplicity of audiences" (p 147). Strong "moral viewpoints threaten others within an organization by making claims on them that might impede their ability to read the drift of social situations" (p 105). In the face of pluralism, the rationally organized procedures provide the kind of surface agreement necessary to be able to make decisions and take actions. Such a surface agreement would seem to encourage the very moral flexibility and relativism Jackall notes in his most successful respondents. Rationality and procedure provide a way to include an ever-shifting array of concerns from the various audiences without actually addressing the various substantive issues they might represent.

Such organizational realities are not limited to corporations with the bottom line in mind. In examining admissions at a small liberal arts college, Stevens explains how competing justifications for admissions decisions are worked out during the admissions process (2007). Admissions officers had to consider academic merit, alumni and donor legacies, affirmative action and racial/ethnic diversity, filling major sports teams, and even whether the student's family could afford to pay tuition or not. The logical incompatibility of the various rationales for college admissions does not, however, seem to impede the process to any large degree. In fact, having multiple criteria to judge a candidate can help make a stronger case. A minority student with a strong academic record and the ability to pay the full tuition is a shoe-in because his acceptance can be justified along three logics— diversity, merit, and cost. The rather vague goal of “creating a class” of students provides a surface agreement that admissions officers and various interested administrators can work toward without necessarily having to resolve any of the personal or professional differences they might have about which criteria for admissions are most important or having to resolve the inherent tensions among the rationales themselves.

The problem of pluralism is exactly the problem Walzer (1983) and Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) want us to consider, but they neglect the role institutional and organizational life play in shaping the ways we deal with these very questions. Human beings appear to have a profound capacity for inconsistency when organized. We do not need to have a deep sense of agreement about the meaning of a situation in order to act collectively in a coordinated manner. The institutionalization of collective action, whether in rituals in a broad sense or in the context of a formally rational bureaucracy, seems to reinforce and expand this capacity. We can gloss over potential contradictions and conflicts in order to get stuff done. Pointing out such behavior has often been the brunt of both political and sociological criticism. But perhaps, as Stevens

suggests about the college admissions process, the goals we set out for such organized action are often inherently ambiguous and uncertain (2007: p 264). The promise of resolving competing logics of justification—or moral claims, more broadly—may, in fact, be untenable or illusory. Excessive attention to resolving such problems might in fact result in a paralysis of organized and coordinated action. Thus understanding the local conditions in which these various justice concerns are given voice, accounted for, and considered hinges largely on the grasp one has of organizational and institutional context in which the “process” takes place.

This final point poses an important problem for the serious sociological consideration of the problem of justice. As Maynard and Manzo (1993) point out, sociology has rarely given much attention to how justice is incorporated into the everyday understandings and actions of people. Instead, the traditional model for social scientific research into the topic is to consider an abstract justice principle (e.g. distributive justice) and judge whether or not a particular social situation accords to that principle. They point to Garfinkel’s consideration of jury decision-making as an exemplary counterpoint. Garfinkel (1967) finds that not only is the jury decision outcome decided first, with explanations or justifications for the outcome coming after, but also that jurors simultaneously employ official and “commonsense” understandings of the case to justify their decision. The jury deliberation process is not one defined solely by the substantive concerns for the case. In fact, the need for consensus has a way of framing the “decision-making” process for the jurors as one in which there is pressure to agree with the majority opinion. The surface agreement established by the jurors and reinforced by the demands of the formal process itself is not only one in which the need to get the decision done is prioritized in consideration for everyone’s private lives, but also one that allows for individual jurors to entertain their own reasons for the decision. An acquittal decision may be voted by one juror

because she thinks the police failed to uphold due process and by another juror because he finds the defendant to be a sympathetic character. The problem of why multiple justice rationales either coexist or come into conflict during such a process would seem to be intimately connected to how the process happens.

NOTE ON DATA AND METHODS

The data that I am drawing on for my analysis primarily come from my own field notes based on my participant observation of 33 different sentencing meetings at the state's Department of Juvenile Justice over roughly a twelve-month period from June 2008 to May 2009. I attended meetings in three of the state's five different geographic regions, which I have labeled Region 1, Region 2, and Region 3.

Region 1 covers primarily the main metropolitan area of the state's largest city. A disproportionate number of those commitments come from the central city's poor, "inner-city" populations, which includes African Americans, Latinos, as well as burgeoning West Indian and African immigrant populations. Region 2 covers a larger geographic area but includes three of the state's poorer, crime-ridden satellite cities, which have been a destination for several immigrant groups. So while there are some cases coming from the suburbs and well-to-do towns, most of the Region 2 office's new commitments come from those satellite cities. Region 3 covers an even larger swath of suburban and rural towns, but it includes one of the state's largest cities as well. While the Region 3 office receives a disproportionate number of new cases from that city and nearby towns, there are more suburban and white youth in this region than the other two. The annual rates of new "commitments" for each region are comparable—in the 2008 fiscal

year, for example, Regions 1, 2, and 3 received 106, 121, and 113 new commitments respectively, down from 142, 144, and 150 in the previous year.

I gained access to these meetings as a part of research proposal to the state's Department of Juvenile Justice Commissioner's Office to explicitly study the sentencing process. I had initially hoped to collect a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data to understand both how the sentencing process worked "on the ground" and in aggregate. I began my project in the offices of the Region 1 Assessment Unit, initially collecting a variety of data from 70 case files from the past year. However, I quickly discovered that the regional offices varied tremendously in the thoroughness and upkeep of their paper files and had to abandon the quantitative aspects of the project. I began my participant observation of the sentencing meetings in the Region 1 office several months before I gained access to the other regional offices, so roughly half (17) of the 33 cases I observed came from this office. I observed an equal number of cases in Regions 2 and 3 (8 each). Given that my analysis is not concerned with comparing differences across regions but with elaborating on similarities that persist in spite of differences, I do not think the larger sample from Region 1 is problematic.

Due to the mutual concerns of the DJJ staff and myself, I did not attend any of the sentencing meetings of young women. The patterns of criminality and victimhood of girls adjudicated delinquent are often very different from their male counterparts, often having to do with issues of running away, precocious sexuality, prostitution, or sexual abuse. While I firmly believe that there needs to be more research on the specific issues of handling the delinquency of girls, I decided that my presence as an adult male might cause these girls undue distress during the rather intimate setting of the sentencing meeting. Therefore, all of the cases I observed were of young men, ranging in age from 12 to 18 years old.

Due to the sensitivity and closed nature of these meetings, I could not tape-record the proceedings. After explaining my research purposes and gaining the consent of the youth and his guardian to sit in on the meeting, I was able to take extensive shorthand notes in notebook for the one to three hour duration. I tried to capture as much of the dialogue, tone, and mannerisms as I could, but the pace of speaking and the number of speakers competing for the floor often made this difficult. My notes represent a combination of direct dialogue and what Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw refer to as “jottings”(1995). I would later type up these notes transcribing the shorthand dialogue and elaborating as best I could in a manner consistent with traditional field note practices.

Given that I had to take handwritten notes, I do not intend to represent this study as the kind of precise conversational analysis found in Maynard and Manzo’s fascinating study (1993) of one jury deliberation. What my field notes might lack in precision, I hope they make for in recurrence across 33 different cases. The aspects that I am choosing to focus my analysis on are those that are present in some way in all of the cases.

My understanding and analysis of these cases is also influenced by my familiarity with the 70 case files that I had access to, the copies of case history and staff reports that I was given, and the many conversations I had with various staff members of all levels. It is through these supplementary sources that I am able to contextualize the sentencing meeting process within the greater organizational processes and understandings. There is a much richer story to tell about the kind of work going on among these professionals and the moral and epistemological dilemmas that it poses for them. What I hope to accomplish here is merely an analysis of a neatly circumscribed part of their efforts defined by the limits of these sentencing meetings.

MULTIPLE JUSTICE RATIONALES IN JUVENILE SENTENCING

The Sentencing Meeting

Based on the data described in the section above, it seems clear that understanding the purpose of the sentencing meeting serves involves having a grasp of what goes on during the meetings. To that end, I have selected a representative case from the 33 observed to describe the process in some detail. This meeting is not only representative in that involves the coverage of prescribed topic areas in an established turn-taking structure, but it is also suggestive of the ritualized structure of the meetings. However, this meeting is also illuminating because it does not go as smoothly as most of the meetings do and those “bumps” reveal the underlying concerns and logic of the process.

The Case of Charles Little

Charles Little’s sentencing meeting was held in what became a familiar room. It was a small recreation room briefly converted into a meeting space in the region’s Assessment Unit—a kind of Spartan dormitory with heavy locks that housed all of the recently adjudicated delinquents by the juvenile courts, awaiting their official treatment facility placement decisions. Pale, winter’s morning light poured in through the window’s translucent, thick, unbreakable safety glass. On three sides, the cement brick walls were painted in thick, white coat. On fourth side was a door and large windows looking into the hospital-like hallway of the Unit. Around the edges of the room were scatted an old piece of gym equipment in questionable condition, an older television atop a movable stand, a late-model PlayStation 2, controllers, and several sports games, a decorative inspirational poster, and a stack of utilitarian, pink plastic chairs. In the center of the room stood a small, oval shaped conference table, showing years of wear.

I entered the room with several of the staff members whom I had come to know from the regional office. Together we collected the chairs from the stack to place around the table. As usual, there were more chairs than room at the table, so the ring of seats bulged out from the space of the table. Ten attendees were expected. For now, it was just six members of the DJJ staff and myself sitting around the table—an administrator, a case historian, a clinician, an education specialist, a teacher, and a caseworker.

In this regional office, the senior-level administrator typically sat at the head of the table, effectively taking the point position in conducting the meeting. In this region, the administrator generally led the questioning of the youth’s account of his crimes or behavior, decided when to move onto the next topic, and responded to challenges or questions from the youth, his parents, or attorney.²⁶

Before the meeting was to begin officially, the administrator, a white woman in her mid-thirties spoke directly to Charles’ caseworker, a black man in his mid-thirties, and the clinician, a white female in her late twenties. She wanted to know if they were on the same page as she regarding the case. Charles faced a relatively minor charge that placed his sentence on *Grid Level 1* of the state sentencing guidelines’ *Grid*. This meant he faced a sentence of 30 to 120 days. Given that his sentence officially started the day the court handed him over to the DJJ’s Assessment Unit over 30 days ago, this meant even less time *in treatment*. The senior administrator told the caseworker and clinician that she planned to “bounce up” Charles sentence to a Grid Level 2—the maximum increase she could give him under the state laws and DJJ procedure. Under a Grid

²⁶ In the other regional offices, this responsibility was more often shared between the senior-level administrator and the caseworker, though the degree of sharing varied widely from case-to-case. Regardless of who was running point, the approach to the position generally involved the same set of performances and responsibilities.

Level 2 sentence, Charles would now face a 3 to 5 month sentence, or essentially, one more month in treatment.²⁷

Such a decision required justification, however, but when it came to Charles, the administrator had plenty. The administrator mentioned that he was apparently heavily “gang-involved.” She discussed with the caseworker and clinician the fact that Charles was also essentially “a street kid” with no real place to call a home. She then brought up the fact that he was “DSS-involved,” meaning that the state’s Department of Social Services had taken some intervening steps in this boy’s life. Charles’s family was “not a stable family.” The caseworker and clinician nodded solemnly in agreement with the administrator’s quick assessment of the young man’s grim case. The administrator then said she was thinking of placing him in the Umbrella Therapeutic Program. The caseworker and clinician both commented: “That’d be great if you have it.”

The administrator then made a quick cell phone call to a colleague to check if indeed there was a placement available. After a brief exchange, she left the room to check something on a nearby DJJ computer. She returned to the room and looked at her watch—twelve minutes past the hour already. She said: “We need to get started.” But before they could she asked: “So everyone is in agreement about the deviation up for substance abuse?” Everyone nodded. She then confirmed that the placement would be at the Umbrella Therapeutic Program. This led to more comments about the boy. The caseworker brought up Charles’s gang-involvement once more. He then said in relation to his substance abuse problem: ““He said he was smoking to see

²⁷ All words or phrases in quotes are from field notes and are by the designated speaker. If there is no speaker, the quotes indicate a commonly used phrasing or idiom.

how high he can get.” He said that the boy had a problem of getting high and then getting into fights.

Someone then mentioned that Charles was in the custody of the DSS and wondered aloud what DSS’s long-term plan for him was. The caseworker flipped through papers in front of him. He announced that DSS was considering “independent living” for the sixteen-year-old. This was met with scoffs and heads shaken in disbelief—not for this boy, not with all of his problems.

The clinician then stepped in and mentioned that Charles was also the victim of a sexual assault. When he was five-years-old, a fourteen-year-old neighbor allegedly molested him. The clinician explained that “this needed to be addressed.” Charles had refused to bring it up, but she was convinced it was contributing to his current problems.

At this point, a caseworker from the Office of Social Services entered the room almost twenty minutes late for the meeting. Since his agency had legal custody, he was obliged to show up in support of Charles. This interruption gave the DJJ staff an excuse to get the meeting officially started. The clinician left the room and returned with the young man. Charles was a tall, heavysset, African American male. His exterior demeanor was seemingly quiet and reserved, but underneath one sensed a seething and defiant anger.

After some introductions around the table, the administrator began the meeting. She started, as usual, by asking why they were here. Charles answered: “I’m here about what I need to do to go back to the community.” The administrator then explained the different parts of his case to be covered in the meeting. She asked him if he was nervous and ensured him he could take a break if he felt overwhelmed at any point. She then asked if he knew his “Grid time.”

Charles answered: “Yeah. 30 to 120 days.”

The administrator explained: “That’s correct, but we could bump you up to 3 to 5 months.”

After the explanations of the process, the meeting began. The administrator asked Charles to give an account of the circumstances surrounding his “committing charges”—i.e., those charges that led to his commitment to the DJJ by the juvenile court. In this case, Charles faced only one charge—possession of a Class E substance (prescription pills)—which is somewhat unusual compared to his much more criminally involved counterparts in DJJ custody.

Charles went through his day. He woke up, showered, took a pill—Seroquel, an anti-psychotic often prescribed in the treatment of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. This did not get him high, he said, so he took two more. Finally, he began feeling high when he got on the bus. When he got to school he put the additional pills he had in the waistband of his pants because he knew he would be patted down at school. He was patted down, but the pills weren’t discovered so he got them into the school. By third period he really began to feel high and fell asleep in class. After this, he asked to go to the school’s “time out” room. He then went to this “cool down” room and slept through lunch. “Actually, I passed out,” Charles admitted. The school called the paramedics and the police officer at the school because he was not responding and they wanted him screened for drugs at the school. Charles explained, “They claimed they found pills on the ground, but I don’t know what they were talkin’ about. They weren’t mine.” At this point, he said, he asked to go to the bathroom. The police officer said he could go if he kept the door open. The office then searched him. Charles then claimed that the officer put the pills in his pocket “because this guy had something against me.” When he was in the ambulance, he gave some additional pills he had on him to the EMT. Charles said the EMT asked why the

cop would frame him, so he tried to explain to him about this particular cop. He concluded by saying that when he got to the hospital, his drug test came up positive.

After this account, the questions began. The administrator peppered Charles with interrogating questions: “Why did you take the Seroquel? Is it your prescription?”

Charles answered: “No. I just wanted to see what it felt like.”

The administrator calmly asked: “Did you buy it?”

Charles replied: “No. Someone gave it to me.”

Administrator: “Why did you take it?”

Charles: “Everyone else in school is doing it.”

Administrator: “Is this a habit of yours?”

Charles: “No, I was just experimenting.”

Administrator then asked: “Why did you accuse the officer of planting them on you?”

Charles replied: “I was high and I didn’t want to get in trouble.”

Administrator: “What do you think about it, looking back?”

Charles said it was “just a phase,” that he was only “experimenting.” He concluded: “It was dumb—it got me here.”

Administrator: “Is that the only reason?”

Charles admitted it was not: “I could have OD’d or died.”

The administrator, with wide eyes and her voice getting louder: “That’s a pretty big concern, isn’t it, sir?”

Charles shrugged.

The questioning went on like this. The administrator probed obvious holes in his account. She tried to point out the folly of his actions—how he failed to think about how dangerous it was to himself to take pills like this and how dangerous it was for those to whom he sold the drugs. Charles shrugged indifferently. She then asked him about his history of substance abuse. He explained quite matter-of-factly that he began smoking marijuana at the age of twelve and that he also did heroin intravenously. The administrator said: “I see a big problem.”

Charles replied: “I *used* to have a problem.”

No one said anything to Charles, but knowing glances were exchanged among the staff.

The administrator then brought up the fact that Charles had previously blamed one particular foster home placement for exposing him to drugs. Charles said that it was correct—he would never have turned to the stuff if it weren’t for that one placement. The administrator tried to explain to him that he had some responsibility in the matter—it was his choice to take the drugs and it was his choice whether he continued to or not. Charles denied needing any help in stopping his drug use because he already had. This statement was met with disbelief among the staff. When confronted, Charles pause, sat back, and said: “I don’t know. What else can I say?”

The administrator turned to the clinician for her thoughts on the matter. She explained: “Charles says he did drugs at a time he didn’t care—this is a common theme with him.” She said

she thought he was using drugs as “a coping strategy.” She commented that Charles had shown some changes with her. Charles admitted that the changes but credited the clinician for them.

At this point, Charles’ attorney walked into the meeting, almost an hour after the appointed time for the meeting. The administrator welcomed him and told him they were just about to talk about Charles’ time in Social Services. He took a seat and the administrator then turned and asked Charles about his time in Social Services. Charles said succinctly: “Not good.” The administrator and the DJJ caseworker pressed him on where he would like to end up after his sentence. Charles mentioned living with an adult older brother. He explained that he had mentioned this possibility to his caseworker at Social Services, but nothing ever happened. Charles reacted with biting cynicism: “This happened before. They’ll pursue it for about a week and then it’ll be done.” Charles did not expect that anyone would follow through in an effort to help him.

The administrator stopped him. She pointed out that all of the people sitting around the table were not the same people who had done it before, that these people all wanted to help him. She told him: “It’s a different day.” She told him that he could call his DJJ caseworker, DSS, or even herself if it wasn’t working out. She then said, very forcefully: “If you want a better life, you’ll need to grab it.” She paused and Charles shifted in his chair. She continued, speaking quietly, deliberately, and with visible emotion: “You have a history that is horrible. We can’t give you your childhood back. But you haven’t responded either. Drugs can’t erase it. Drugs will only ruin your future.”

The administrator then switched topics to Charles’ education. Someone mentioned something about problems with fights in school. The administrator immediately asked the reason

for this. Charles said it was gang-related. Unlike many of his peers who minimize their gang involvement to authorities, Charles confidently admitted to being a member of one of the city's more prominent and thus more targeted gangs. The administrator pointed out that things were heating up with a rival gang and that posed a threat to his personal safety: "People are dying out there. Isn't that a reason to get out?"

Squinting his eyes, Charles said coldly: "No, it's too late."

Administrator: "Don't you want a future?"

Charles: "Yeah. I didn't say it was a good one. No one asked me that."

The administrator was visibly frustrated with Charles and his bleak outlook. She told him so, and then moved on, cueing the educational specialist and teacher to begin their report. They explained that Charles was interested in getting his GED. His assessment tests indicated that this might be a good option. In fact, they characterized him as someone whose school performance did not match up with his skill level. They recommended that he still enroll in a pre-GED program because the test had gotten harder recently. When they asked Charles if he liked school, he simply said: "No."

The education specialist pointed out that Charles had ambitions to be involved in music or acting and said that he would need more education to achieve in either of those fields. Charles disagreed. The administrator then asked Charles: "Do you want to live?"

Charles replied: "Of course. I've accomplished that without anybody's help."

The administrator challenged him: "All you've accomplished is still breathing."

Charles: "That's all I need to do."

The administrator sighed and shifted the conversation over to the clinician. The clinician first reported on Charles's behavior while on the Assessment Unit. Charles was at Level 3, which was the second highest level of privileges. "He processes well with me," she said, in regard to his one-on-one meetings with her. She mentioned that he was restrained once—that he needed to learn to control his anger. The administrator turned to Charles. He explained: "I've been doing well only because this meeting was coming up." This led to another heated exchange.

The clinician then continued, praising Charles for his model behavior when it came to neatness. She then went through her treatment recommendations. These included "anger management" and "self-esteem work." When asked what he thought, Charles was defiant.

This time, the education specialist jumped in: "How old do you think you'll live to be?"

Charles replied: "I don't know."

Education specialist: "Don't you care?"

Charles: "No."

Charles's attorney stepped in, explaining that he did not know Charles very well because he had just been handed this case two months ago. He shared the DJJ staff members' frustration with his client's defeatist attitude and offered meek praise for the young man's honesty.

The administrator then moved on to conclude the meeting. She explained to Charles the details of the sentencing procedure, his right to appeal, and what would happen next. She went over a standard checklist of procedures and policies guiding what was going to happen to Charles and then had the boy read over it and sign it. After all of this, she asked: "Mr. Little, is there anything you would like to add?"

Charles replied: “Nope.”

The administrator then began: “I have a lot of concerns. I keep hearing 18, 18, 18. It’s a number, a date on the calendar. You blame DSS for everything. When you turn 18, you’ll be hit with the cold hard reality that it wasn’t them. This is my opinion—you can disagree. I’m not buying the ‘don’t care’ attitude. I think you’re scared and hurt. The drugs, the gangs—all symptoms of hurt. As far as coping skills go, those two suck. I think you would be fine with being in an institution because you’d be happy to be right about how bleak your future really is. I see your talents—we all do. What we see doesn’t matter. What matters is what you think. It is your decision whether you do something or throw it away. Breathing is not living. Your body might be there but you are on life support.”

She continued saying that there were “a lot of treatment issues.” For this reason her recommendation would be *deviation*²⁸ up one Grid Level, from Grid Level 1 to 2. She would give Charles the maximum sentence of 5 months from the Date of Commitment at the Umbrella Treatment program. The challenge, she told him, was not just stopping the substance abuse, but getting at the underlying issues. With that the meeting was ended.

After the meeting, I spoke with the administrator. She seemed emotionally and physically drained. “What can you do with a kid like that?” she asked. She said she felt bad for the boy. So much had gone wrong in his life, from a screwed up family, sexual abuse, and his experiences with Social Services, to his substance abuse and gang involvement. It was obvious to her that he needed help. In this case, the boy’s actual crime—a low Grid Level 1 crime—belied his

²⁸ This is the term used to describe the decision to change a juvenile’s sentencing range from the standard set by the state’s sentencing guidelines. Such *deviations* are, of course, restricted to one Grid Level up or down (though deviations are up are a lot more common than deviations down).

treatment needs. His defeatist attitude and pessimism was understandable, but it also needed to be overcome if the boy was to be helped. She was not sure that was possible.

Justifying a Sentence

The case of Charles Little is instructive for several reasons. First, the meeting is conducted in a logical and reasonable sequence with each topic discussed in turn despite the obvious “backstage” predetermination of the sentence before the meeting begins.²⁹ Therefore, the various pieces of information brought into the meeting’s discussion—the circumstances surrounding the crimes, treatment issues, school performance, gang involvement, substance abuse, and behavior on the Assessment Unit—cannot simply be considered evidence that weighs on the sentence decision as in a model of rational decision-making. Instead, the one to two hour discussion that leads up to the pronouncement of the sentence is decoupled from the supposed action taking place. In this case, as in every other case observed, the sentence and ostensible placement decision is always left until the end to give the impression that the various pieces of information discussed have been considered and rationally deliberated.

By taking the time to cover such an array of information about the youth and his various failings, the meeting gives the distinct impression that the largely predetermined sentence and placement decision are a logical and reasonable result of the weight of this evidence. Thus what

²⁹ Of course, the state’s sentencing guidelines and the DJJ’s limited resources and organizational exigencies often make such explicit discussion of sentences and placement irrelevant. Sentences occur within limited ranges and placement options are usually limited to two or three. Thus they are generally “known” ahead of time. Placement might be a question due to the fact that it is not known at the time of the meeting where there are “available beds” for a delinquent. Any adjustments in sentence that might be made during the course of the meeting are generally symbolic gestures. In one regional office, one administrator made exactly this point to me. When I asked her why she gave one young man 10 months instead of 12 months as she initially said she would, she explained it was a potential motivation to get the young man to cooperate with treatment. However, she believed that the Regional Sentencing Committee would change his sentence back to 12 months. Moreover, the length of his sentence—and all DJJ sentences at that—would ultimately depend on his “progress in treatment.” Specific sentence determinations (e.g. “7 months”) announced at the sentencing meeting thus have little real weight in the organization.

goes on in these meetings is a kind of performance, but a performance with specific intent—namely, to justify the sentence and placement decision that has been determined largely independently of the discussion. Moreover, as will be discussed in detail below, the various pieces of the meeting follow what seems to be a rather common, prescribed format. The topics covered and the manner in which they covered in this meeting is consistent with a pattern observed across the other 32 meetings. In other words, the sentencing meeting is a *ritualized* process or performance, with a stock set of topics to be covered in a largely turn-taking structure.

The content of this case's meeting also makes it particularly instructive. From the very beginning of the backstage discussion, the reasons for deviating Charles' sentence up a Grid Level that the various staff members give keep on changing, without any apparent regard for these variations and their potentially inconsistent logic. First, his sentence should be extended because he is a gang member. He poses a threat to others—the public and other gang members—and is a potential target of gang violence himself. Then, it is mentioned that he is a “street kid.” He has nowhere else to turn. Next, he has an unstable family. This means that the work of getting this boy's life in order cannot happen with a parent. It also means there might be some behaviors that need to be unlearned or that there might be concerns about emotionally-damaging trauma experienced in such an environment. We then find out that Charles has some serious drug problems. Addiction requires treatment. Next it comes up that Charles has been sexually abused. This surely requires a lot of time in therapy.

By the time Charles is brought into the meeting, we learn a lot more about his failings and possible grounds for extending his sentence. He has shown terrible judgment regarding his own safety and the safety of those around him through his taking and selling of prescription pills. He has little or no interest in investing any energy in his own education. And he is completely

and utterly resistant to admitting he has a serious drug problem (or any other problem for that matter). Finally, he suffers from a frustrating and heartbreaking fatalism that makes him a terrible candidate for successful rehabilitation.

Such a litany of justificatory reasons for a sentence is not unusual in the DJJ sentencing meeting. In fact, it is the rule. Table 1 outlines six different common rationales for a sentence and placement decision: safety, treatment, responsibility, cooperation, educational, and legal-bureaucratic. These distinct became apparent from early observations and were confirmed through analysis of the field notes. The turn-taking structure and distinct topics discussed at each meeting immediately suggested the variation in categories of justification. Multiple iterations of coding and analysis of field notes confirmed the pattern of rationales and the distinct logics employed within each. The various criteria discussed and brought up through questioning—either negatively or positively—were sorted according to these underlying logics. In all 33 cases observed, at least four of the six categories were brought up at least once; in 16 cases, five of the six categories were brought up at least once; and in 15 cases, all six categories were mentioned. Table 2 in the Appendix provides a case-by-case breakdown of the categories covered. The following sections described how these categories were deployed in the sentencing discussions.

Safety

Concerns about safety came up in 25 of the 33 observed meetings. While not necessarily the most frequently discussed criteria, concerns about safety, when they are relevant to a case, play a paramount role in the DJJ's sentencing responsibilities. Three distinct yet interrelated criteria fall primarily under this theme: the threat the youth poses to others or the public more generally; the threat the client's behavior poses to himself; and while least common, though

TABLE 1

Criteria (Frequency)	Underlying Logic	Examples	Hypothetical Effect on Sentence
<i>Safety (25/33)</i>	Incapacitation: By keeping client off the streets, public and personal safety guaranteed	-Serious gang-involvement; therefore, targeted by others -History of violent crimes, such as robbery, assaults; therefore threat to others -History of inappropriate sexual behavior; therefore, threat to others and self	Length of sentence determined by the level of threat an individual poses to self and others
<i>Treatment (32/33)</i>	Therapeutic Ethos: Underlying cognitive and emotional problems drive deviant behavior, but can be overcome through treatment	-History of abuse and/or neglect -Medicated for previous mental health diagnosis -Substance abuse or addiction concerns	Length of sentence indefinite—based on successful completion of treatment
<i>Responsibility (32/33)</i>	Punitive: Recognition of capacity for moral agency and thus blame and responsibility for previous actions and their consequences	-Failure to consider all possible consequences of potentially dangerous criminal action (e.g. having a gun) -Failure to empathize with victims of crimes -Marshaling exculpatory reasons or circumstances for criminal behavior (e.g. family pressure to be involved in family drug business)	Length of sentence based on perceived degree of individual responsibility for crimes
<i>Cooperation (31/33)</i>	Rehabilitation: Recognition of a capacity and need to change behavior and attitude	-Displayed changes in behavior and attitude while on the Assessment Unit. -Call for a change in behavior and attitude from the youth -Resisted therapy and treatment programs offered so far	Length of sentence indefinite—based on successful demonstration of cooperation with authorities and changes in behavior and attitude
<i>Education (33/33)</i>	Social Integration: The degree of embeddedness in educational institutions and thus potential for legitimate employment	-Concern over serious educational deficiencies displayed in assessment tests -Evaluation of school performance so far -Establishing feasible educational goals given skill level (e.g. GED or vocational training)	Length of sentence informed by perceived educational and skill deficits, as well as displayed commitment to school
<i>Legal/Bureaucratic (25/33)</i>	Fairness Principle: Commitment to due process in order to ensure consistent, equal treatment across cases	-Deference to the Regional Sentencing Committee's ability to change a sentence and placement decision -Mention of sentencing guidelines as determining sentence range	Length of sentence based on pre-established rules by type of crime committed

nonetheless meriting serious scrutiny, is the threat the youth poses to his family members or other intimates. The underlying logic concerning safety asserts the DJJ's minimal responsibility to *incapacitate* those youth who are potential threats to the public or themselves. The presumed effect of such logic would be that the greater threat to safety a youth poses, the longer his sentence will be. Violent or dangerous crimes, behaviors associated with violence such as gang involvement, or even sexually inappropriate behaviors, are invariably discussed in the course of a meeting as cause for concern and as possible indicators for a longer sentence or more secure placement (even if those things don't actually happen).

In the case of Charles Little, concerns about safety were raised at several points. Before Charles is even brought in, the fact that he is in a gang and the fact that he has been getting into fights as the result of his drug use both get mentioned by staff members. When the administrator is grilling Charles about both taking and selling drugs, she refers explicitly to his apparent lack of concern for his own safety and the safety of those to whom he sells drugs. Finally, when the administrator questions Charles about his gang involvement, which he confidently admits, she says that "people are dying out there" because of the gang violence.

Even in cases more promising than Charles Little's, concerns about safety will be discussed. Take, for example, the case of David Gonzalez. David was a charming, smooth-talking young man of about sixteen. Before the sentencing meeting, his caseworker admitted to being taken in by his charms. Not only was David particularly eloquent and honest in expressing his motivations and emotions, but he came from a relatively stable family, headed by a hardworking, caring single father. For all intents and purposes, David showed a lot of promise in terms of how he would respond to therapeutic treatment, how well he could do in school, and

how amenable he was to changing his ways. Nevertheless, David faced charges of Assault and Battery on a Police Officer charge and Intimidating a Witness stemming from the same incident. David had attacked a cop who was arresting his friend while they were in school and threatened the school security officer who had turned his friend in. When it came to announce the sentence, this is what happened:

David's father then asked: "How long?"

The Caseworker told him: "It can vary. The court said 3 to 5 months, but unfortunately, the incident with the police officer ups the stakes. It's gonna be 5 to 8 months. He'll go to program with that amount of time. Typically, they do that time, but sometimes it's less or sometimes it's more. There's the potential to go either way."

David's father nodded and replied: "It's up to him to put in a lot of effort."

The Caseworker then said: "One thing I will say, when there's a Grid Level 3, I can recommend a secure setting, but I don't think David needs that. He will be able to do the family reunification stuff sooner. You don't need to be under lock and key." In this case, the serious, violent charges were mentioned to justify deviating his sentence up one level, but interestingly, were not enough to justify putting him in a secure facility.

Treatment

An integral part of each sentencing meeting is some discussion of the "client's treatment needs," usually done by the psychologically-trained clinician. Falling under this category were an array of topics: most often a specific mention of categorized "treatment needs" or a "treatment plan" (e.g. anger management, decision-making skills); but also specific mental health diagnoses

(e.g. ADHD, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder) and accompanying psychopharmacological medications; any kind of history of “trauma” (which includes physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, poverty, domestic instability, maltreatment, violence experienced, loss of close relations, being a witness to violence, and so on); concerns over addiction or substance abuse; concerns about *issues* or *underlying* emotions driving behavior; and concerns about particular cognitive habits (such as wishful thinking, excessive rationalization of past behavior, or blaming others for one’s problems). Discussion of such concerns happened explicitly in 32 of the 33 cases observed.³⁰ The underlying logic of these criteria is what Nolan (1998) has called the *therapeutic ethos*, a cluster of ideas framing the self in the language and understanding of psychotherapy. Under the therapeutic ethos, deviant and delinquent behaviors are believed to be the result of emotional and/or cognitive disturbances. Such disturbances are usually caused by the traumatic experiences a youth has faced (e.g. abuse, neglect, or violence witnessed,), but may be caused or catalyzed by neuropsychological disorders or abuse of various illicit substances. These emotional disturbances need to be dealt with through the appropriate treatment—whether medication, group therapy, one-on-one psychotherapy, or other alternative. The DJJ thus has a responsibility to concern itself with identifying such disturbances and providing the necessary psychotherapeutic treatment.

In the case of Charles Little, treatment concerns are numerous and play a prominent role in the sentencing meeting discussion. First, it is mentioned that he comes from an unstable family situation and that he had, in effect, been homeless. Then, his substance abuse is brought

³⁰³⁰ In the one case where it did not happen explicitly, it was certainly implicit. The client was an effeminate, openly gay African American male, convicted of Unarmed Robbery. His attorney and caseworker hinted at “difficulties” the boy faced at home and in the community because of his sexuality, but these were not directly addressed as concerns for treatment—perhaps in part because his mother, who was uncomfortable with her son’s sexuality, was sitting in the room. The implication, of course, was that the reactions to the boy were causing him emotional distress and contributing to his criminal behavior.

up. Next the clinician mentions the fact that Charles had been sexually abused. When the young man is finally brought into the room, there is extensive discussion about Charles' history of substance abuse, even as he tries to minimize the extent of his problem. The clinician also mentions "anger management" and "self-esteem work" as part of her treatment recommendations for Charles. Even the administrator frames his problems with drugs and gangs as "symptoms" of an underlying "hurt." When she announces the decision to extend his sentence, she refers to the fact that Charles has "a lot of treatment issues" as the main motivation.

The therapeutic ethos pervades the work of the DJJ, as it does the work of most social welfare agencies. This means that every client's behavior will be interpreted through this lens, even if it does not appear appropriate. Chris West, for example, was an eighteen-year-old white male with no previous record, who came to the DJJ with an unusually high Grid Level 5 Malicious Explosives charge (meaning he faced a 12-24 month sentence) for what turned out to be a relatively minor role in a group that set a teacher's car on fire. Although it was his friend, a convicted serial arsonist, who acted as the main instigator of the crime, Chris took full responsibility for the consequences of his charges. He had been a model citizen while serving several months in pre-trial detention and while on the Assessment Unit. He was thoughtful and introspective with the clinician and refused to make any excuses for going along with his friend. The clinician made a point of expressing what pleasure it had been to work with the young man. Nonetheless, she had a litany of treatment recommendations—things Chris would need to work on—"decision making," "empathy work," "distortive thinking," and "impulsivity." In spite of the fact that Chris's actions over the previous four months had suggested these very concerns were not a continuing problem for him, such treatment recommendations were and somehow still needed to be made.

Responsibility

In almost all of the sentencing meetings observed, the youth was asked to give an account of his crimes, and if relevant, his behavior on probation. Though these accounts may vary in their level of detail, clarity, consistency, or honesty, the DJJ staff members (usually the senior administrator or the caseworker, though occasionally the clinician) press the youth, asking for further details, questioning motivations, demanding explanations, and pointing out flaws in the logic of the account and the youth's reasoning. The group always emphasizes that the youth's actions leading to his crimes or probation violations are due to his choices, actions, and failures in judgment. Staff members will often present the youth with a series of hypothetical consequences to actions (in the case of carrying a gun: considering whether the gun has "a body on it," making oneself a bigger target by being a bigger threat, or killing an innocent bystander) and asking whether or not they considered them. The strategy behind these verbal tactics is to emphasize the relationship between decisions, actions and consequences. The youth has failed as a culpable moral agent and is thus responsible for the consequences of his actions. Concern over such failings of responsibility came up in 32 of 33 observed cases. The underlying logic of these concerns over individual responsibility is *punitive*. As a failed moral agent, the youth deserves punishment—in most cases, at the very least, the restriction of his freedom.

In the case of Charles Little, even though the DJJ staff members clearly see this young man's behavior as the product of his various traumatic experiences, there is still explicit mention of his individual responsibility for his actions. When she asks him to give an account of his crimes, the administrator questions Charles' judgment in both taking and selling prescription medication. By emphasizing potential consequences of such actions, she points out that Charles failed as a rational, responsible person. Later on in the meeting when Charles tries to blame his

drug use on his foster care experience, the administrator again stresses that he chose to take the drugs on his own and that any continued drug use would be the result of his own choices.

The emphasis on individual agency and responsibility would seem to contradict the largely deterministic framework of the therapeutic ethos. Nonetheless, questioning a youth's judgment and holding him accountable for his actions plays an equally prominent role in the sentencing meeting process. Antoine Freamon, a fifteen-year-old African American male, came to the DJJ with charges from two separate incidents in which he ran from the police. Before the meeting, the staff and his attorney discussed his "borderline IQ," need for a thorough "neuro-psych evaluation," and the impact of his excessive drug use on his mental functioning. Yet when he was asked to give an account of his crimes, there was particular emphasis on his failure to exercise sound judgment.

The administrator scolded him: "I fear that you think it's a joke out there. It's deadly serious when you run from a police officer with a drawn gun. You're damn lucky to be in DJJ right now. It'll happen again. You're on their radar. I've seen your CORI [criminal record]. You're gonna have to deal with it. If you give them no reason, eventually they will start looking someplace else. They have better things to do with their time. I'm concerned about your peers. You're a leader here, but not in the community. There's some work to be done to stay out of trouble. If you don't do the work, you'll end up either in a six-foot cell or a six-foot hole. You're 15. That is not how you're story should end."

The administrator emphasizes that not only his confinement in the DJJ is the direct result (and a preferable result to the alternative of being shot) of his decision to run from the police, but the fact that the police are now targeting him is as well. Antoine thus bears responsibility for how

others are responding to him. Continuing to make such bad decisions will result in more severe consequences. Only by choosing to “stay out of trouble” will he avoid such consequences.

Cooperation

As the quote from the administrator just above suggests, concerns over the youth’s moral agency are not limited to his past actions. The DJJ staff members also consider how cooperative a youth has been during his stay on the Assessment Unit as a potential predictor for his capacity for future behavior. The team is trying to assess whether the youth has demonstrated an active effort to conform to the rules and expectations of his new environment, actively and cooperatively participating in the *processing*, or examination, of his past with the clinician or other staff members. The underlying logic of these concerns is *rehabilitative*. It involves a necessary recognition of the youth’s moral agency in his capacity to change his own behavior, and in this way is a corollary of responsibility but with a future temporality rather than primary focus on the past. Without his own willingness to change his behaviors and attitudes, the process of rehabilitation will stall out. There is a clear preoccupation with the youth’s potential for change—it came up in 31 of the 33 observed cases.

Concerns over cooperation occur at two levels. The first level centers on whether or not the youth has cooperated with the staff and the “treatment process” so far. If he has not, this will be brought up as a problem (and a potential justification for extending a sentence); the staff members will call for change in the youth’s behavior and attitude, emphasizing that they are key for his future success. If the youth has cooperated, then this brings up the second level of concern over cooperation—namely, whether or not the demonstrated changes are sincere or not. Demonstrated changes are usually doubted on one of two grounds: the youth is just putting on a

show or the changes are merely an artifact of the extremely controlled environment of the Assessment Unit. Because such changes are not the result of some deep internal conversion, they are believed to be inadequate for the trials and temptations of the outside world. The youth, his parents, his attorney, and even DJJ staff members might testify to the youth's demonstrated changes so far, but they are always cautiously considered : their sincerity is also suspect.

In the case of Charles Little, there is clear and strong preoccupation with the young man's fatalism. His unwillingness to admit to needing help with a drug problem and his apparent disregard for the potential deadly dangers his gang involvement poses for himself are viewed as serious impediments to his future success. Even when the clinician attempts to testify to his demonstrated changes, pointing out that he had improved his behavior since getting restrained when he first arrived, Charles himself dismisses his improvements as the result of his own instrumental calculation for the minor privileges offered by the Assessment Unit's disciplinary system. The DJJ Assessment Unit staff members recognize that without his willing participation, the future efforts of other juvenile justice professionals to improve this young man's life chances will be for naught. This leads the administrator to give the characteristic call for a change: "If you want a better life, you will have to grab it."

In most cases, the youth does not display such a fatalistic front. If anything, most of the youth and their supporters are eager to demonstrate that they have indeed changed, even if the evidence is thin. However, the evidence for rehabilitation is normally ambiguous. Supporting a youth's claims of real change involves some amount of reputational risk for the staff members, so they often hedge in their assessment. Vincent Frank, a fourteen-year-old white male, was committed to the DJJ for multiple Domestic Assault and Battery charges for attacking his mother and handicapped sister. The boy's mother, however, testified in regards to her son's

demonstrable changes in attitude and behavior. The administrator conceded that her son may have changed, and then explained: “But the problem is: we don’t know if they are sincere or not.” When the boy’s mother insisted that she had seen “a real positive change,” the administrator replied: “He has a long way to go.” This call for more time to render judgment about the observed changes upset the boy’s mother, but it demonstrates the DJJ staff members’ concerns with regard to making such predictions about a youth’s future improvements.

Education

In all 33 sentencing meetings observed, there is at least some discussion of educational concerns, usually led by one of the region’s educational specialists or a teacher from the Assessment Unit. Falling under educational concerns are discussions of the youth’s previous school record (including grades, any special education plans, school attendance, and behavior while in school); demonstrated skill level (usually based on an assessment test); performance in the Assessment Unit classroom; and any future educational plans, which usually includes discussion of career ambitions. While not every component is discussed in every case, at least some educational concerns were brought up.

In order to understand the underlying logic of including such a discussion, it is important to remember that there is a broadly recognized consensus that school serves multiple functions in the lives of teenagers. Most juvenile probation terms, for example, include some expectations of school attendance and behavior. Commitment to school not only sets the youth on the path to more lucrative legitimate employment, but it also keeps them busy, out of trouble, and under the influence of (in the language of the staff members) *more positive* peers. These ideas, broadly speaking, reveal a practical concern with a youth’s level of *social integration*. A youth with good

grades, above average skill levels, and good school attendance is a lot less likely to find himself embedded in criminal networks or seduced by a potentially lucrative criminal career. A youth who is failing or has severe educational deficits will often be less committed to school, and thus will have both more idle time for illicit activities and weaker legitimate employment prospects. Thus, the DJJ thus has a responsibility to ensure that the youth in their charge either maintain their commitment to school or become reintegrated into the traditional or an alternative educational path to legitimate employment.

In the case of Charles Little, it is obvious that the young man has non-academic problems related to school—fights, drug use, and selling drugs. But, according to the educational specialist and the Assessment Unit teacher, Charles' educational assessment scores indicate that his skills exceed his actual school performance so far. The combination of his problems in the school and his educational skill level thus make him a good candidate for the General Educational Development (GED) exam. The educational specialist encourages the boy to continue his education beyond the GED so that he might achieve his career ambitions to be involved in music or acting, but these suggestions appear to fall on deaf ears.

While Charles is characteristically pessimistic about his educational future, many of the youth seem to be buoyed by the mention of positive educational assessments, alternative educational opportunities now available to them through the DJJ, or the discussion of feasible career goals. Benjamin White was a seventeen-year-old white male with long history of minor criminal charges and physical abuse at the hands of both of his parents. His school record indicated that he was in the ninth grade, although his age would have normally put him in either the eleventh or twelfth grade. At first, he had ambitions of completing high school, but at the encouragement of the DJJ educational staff, he decided to work toward his GED. This was

discussed during his sentencing meeting. The team asked him what his career ambitions were. He mentioned that he wanted to learn a trade—perhaps become a carpenter or electrician. The administrator told him enthusiastically that they would work to get him into just such a program that regularly worked with the DJJ. Benjamin smiled in response. On the cusp of legal adulthood, and thus emancipation from his unfortunate family situation, Benjamin would be otherwise ill-prepared for a law-abiding life without such an opportunity.

Legal-Bureaucratic

The final set of criteria used to justify a sentence might be thought of as an overarching logic to the entire sentencing process—namely, that each sentence must fall in within established legal requirements and procedures and, at the same time, within the boundaries of practical organizational constraints and exigencies. However, deference to these procedures, rules, and constraints is often brought up as part of the explanation for a sentence and placement or as an indication that the sentence decided upon at the moment might change according to the whims of these larger impersonal forces. In 25 of the 33 cases observed, there was some reference to these rules, procedures, or organizational constraints on the sentencing and placement decision. The underlying logic of these concerns is *fairness*. Under this principle, all cases are to receive equal consideration under the law and equal treatment through due process. In theory, the goal is to ensure that stealing a car in the inner city gets the same sentence as stealing a car in a posh suburban town.³¹ In practice, such rules and considerations are usually brought up in reference to decisions or actions that may not be favorable to the youth, his parents, or his attorney.

³¹ In practice, however, this would seem to be beyond the purview of the DJJ. The judge's decision to commit a youth to the DJJ seems to vary greatly according to region, town, city, etc. For the DJJ staff, this is common wisdom. The rule of thumb is this: in more affluent, rural/suburban areas with less overall crime, there is less tolerance for any kind of crime, so a youth who ends up in juvenile court seems to more likely to be committed for

In the case of Charles Little, consideration of the official rules is mentioned briefly, but in an important way. When the administrator asks Charles if he knows the sentence range he faces and he tells her “30 to 120 days,” she replies: “That’s correct, but we could bump you up to 3 to 5 months.” This is important because the administrator in fact has already decided she was going to do just that, but also because she is indicating to him that, within the law, the DJJ staff members have jurisdiction and authority to do this. Thus his extended sentence is thus not arbitrary or beyond the team’s authority—but legal and fair because it falls within the established sentencing rules. Such mention of the DJJ staff member’s capacity to *deviate* a sentence up a Grid Level on the state’s established sentencing guideline grid was the one of most common appeals to legal-bureaucratic criteria observed, even when it wasn’t applied (although the same capacity to *deviate* a sentence down a Grid Level was brought up in only one of the observed meetings).

Appeals to such legal-bureaucratic criteria were also involved in cases involving gun possession charges (which required a minimum 6 month sentence), concerns about the start date of a sentence (which begins on the date the court commits the youth to the DJJ), restrictions on placement options (the youth would be placed in the facility with “available beds”), and when explaining the tentative nature of sentences pronounced at the meeting. During the course of many of the sentencing meetings, the DJJ staff members would be sure to explain that the

any charge, even “minor” charges; in poorer, urban areas with much higher crime rates, only the most serious charges merit commitment to the DJJ. Thus, in the latter jurisdictions, many delinquents are given many “second chances” (e.g. probation, alternative court programs) for their minor crimes before the judges “get sick of seeing them” and finally commit them to the DJJ. This means, in practice, that a delinquent from the inner city facing an Assault and Battery charge is a lot more likely to have more extensive criminal involvement than his suburban counterpart with the same charge. While there has been some consideration about the apparent aggressiveness in official action against delinquents in the suburban areas, especially as it relates to the issue of disproportionate minority confinement (see, for example, Sampson and Laub 1993), there has been little consideration of the systemic effects of this apparent judicial reluctance to take official action—either in terms of the potential perceptions it engenders against an apparently “soft” criminal justice system or in terms of the unintended consequences it has further down the criminal justice system stream.

sentence that they came up with at the end of the meeting was “only a recommendation” that would need the official stamp of approval from the Regional Sentencing Committee.

Juan Sosa, a seventeen-year-old Latino male, was committed on several drug distribution charges for selling marijuana and crack cocaine. These charges placed him on Grid Level 3, with a 5 to 8 month sentence, but the administrator was sure to mention that she could possibly decide to deviate his sentence up one level. During the course of the sentencing meeting, a very sympathetic portrait of the young man was presented by various attendees: no extensive criminal involvement outside of the charges; he allegedly turned to selling drugs after hearing that his girlfriend was pregnant with his child; he had been a model citizen while on the Assessment Unit. When it came to pronounce his sentence, the administrator told him six months because “the quantity of drugs” he was selling was a concern. Juan nodded, but then the administrator warned him: “The RSC might still decide eight months.” So the administrator indicates that she has bought into the sympathetic portrait of this young man to some degree, but leaves open the possibility that her sentence recommendation will be ignored by a process and rules largely indifferent to his particular situation and beyond her control. While she might recognize the exceptional nature of his case, she explains that the process, in deference to established rules, may not.

DISCUSSION

Each of the rationales or justifications for sentencing decisions is driven by a distinct logic, which is not always compatible with its companions. For example, extending someone’s sentence because he is gang-involved and therefore poses a threat to the public and himself (incapacitation) is very different from extending someone’s sentence because he needs more time

in “treatment” or “therapy” to deal with addictions or a traumatic past (therapeutic ethos). Yet such fundamentally different (and even incompatible) rationales are left unresolved in the course of the organization’s action. The co-existence of different justifications for the same sentence not only fails to undermine the process, but it seems to reinforce the legitimacy of it.

After spending an hour or two hearing such a variety of reasons why he is failing, the youth, his parent, and attorney are hard-pressed to surmount a credible argument on such an array of different fronts, especially when what’s at stake is often only the difference of a few months (or one month in the case of Charles Little). In the case of Elijah Bell, a sixteen year old African American male, this is exactly what happened. Elijah was deeply gang-involved; in fact, it was something of a family tradition that had already cost his older brother his life. Elijah himself had already been shot. His charges stemming from an encounter with a school safety officer and the police were only Grid Level 2 (3 to 5 month sentence), but the DJJ staff decided to *deviate* his sentence up to a Grid Level 3, giving him the maximum 8 month sentence. They had discussed his crimes, his failures in judgment, his gang involvement, his school performance, his treatment needs, behavior on the unit, and even his apparent changes in behavior and demeanor. But when the sentence was announced, his mother exploded in protest. She shouted: “You are all going on gang-affiliated.” She tried to claim that her youngest son was “a good boy.” The DJJ staff conceded her point, but insisted: “He’s got a lot of stuff to work on.” Even if Elijah was not as involved in a gang, he still had to deal with the violent death of his brother, being a victim of violence himself, a failing school record, and a host of other issues.

The sentence justified on multiple grounds can withstand scrutiny of any one rationale, not by addressing such a challenge directly, but by evading it and turning to another rationale. The reason the members of the DJJ staff take into account such a variety of information in their

sentencing and employ several logics of justification is because these are the demands of the various publics and public interests they must answer to. The DJJ must simultaneously punish, treat, rehabilitate, educate, nurture, and incapacitate the youth in their charge. Conservative watchdog groups push for harsher punishments, longer sentences, and more concern with public safety, and liberal advocacy groups push for more due process, more nurturing treatment, and greater concern for the circumstances that drive youth to criminality. In the face of such cultural and structural pluralism, it is not in the interest of the DJJ, or any part of the juvenile justice system for that matter, to resolve the substantive differences of the various understandings of what juvenile justice *ought* to be about. It can, to some degree, present itself as everything to everyone. Moreover, the sheer variety of individual cases, from budding psychopathic career criminals and serious cases of mental illness, to petty thrill seekers and foolish adolescents in the wrong place at the wrong time, makes the task of the DJJ necessarily ambiguous and uncertain. The various “clients” of the DJJ are not necessarily served by a narrowing of the vision of what justice is.

The sentencing meetings at the DJJ, and the juvenile justice system more generally, certainly represent the kind of institution where there is an overlap in the “spheres of justice” (Walzer 1983) or “logics of justification” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). However, there is no effort to resolve these different spheres or logics of justice. The key question is why not. How do the DJJ’s sentencing meetings produce a meaningful sentence without a strong agreement about what’s really at stake?

The answer lies in the process itself. Given that the sentence and placement are largely pre-determined by sentencing guidelines, organizational exigencies, and the informed opinion of the DJJ staff members before the meeting even begins, we might describe the sentencing meeting

as largely constituted by symbolic action. Given that this symbolic action is largely organized according to the scripts of information collected and pre-established criteria, we might describe the sentencing meeting as a highly ritualized process. Ritualized, formal social action allows for the coordination of actors and the potentially disparate meanings and understandings they bring to the action. Ritualized action allows the actors to establish a surface agreement about what is going on in spite of conflict and contradictions below that surface. Ritualized action reinforces the coordination of practical activity over the need for coordination through shared conceptual understanding.

That surface agreement provides a new layer or sense of “what’s at stake”—namely, the successful completion of the ritualized action. Substantive concerns are subordinated to their role in the ritualized action. So, as described above, each justice criterion can be discussed, *in turn*. The administrator grills the youth on his crimes, then they talk about substance abuse, then they talk about gang involvement, then the educational specialist steps in, then they discuss the youth’s behavior on the unit, then the clinician gives her evaluation, and then they explain the procedural rules. The boundaries of substantive concerns are confined to their turn, and often, to their expert (clinician, education specialist, administrator, etc).

In addition to providing the structure in which all of these various criteria can be covered, the ritualized structure of the process also allows for an efficient way of handling specific substantive concerns—namely, by dismissing them. When the problems, conflicts, and contradictions bubble up from below to disturb the surface agreement, they can be dealt with by reframing the problem as an interruption to the current process (Winship 2004). So when one youth vociferously denies being a member of a gang, the administrator says: “We are not going to debate that now.” When one anxious mother keeps interrupting with a question about what a

caseworker meant by his claim that her son “had a long way to go,” he responds sharply: “We’ll get into that. Let me continue.” And when an attorney rants about how unfair it was of a judge to commit her client to the DJJ for “school-based” probation violations, the administrator gives a polite, “thank you,” and moves on to her pronouncement of the sentence.

When one considers the problem of due process within the justice system more broadly, these findings are not all that surprising. The various procedural rules and ceremonious nature of court proceedings make it a highly restrictive kind of interaction for meting out justice. The presumption of due process is that much of the substantive work is done outside of the court and prior to the meeting. Sunstein has given some consideration to this kind of practical problem in the context of court decisions with the term “incompletely theorized agreement.” He explains:

Participants in legal controversies try to produce incompletely theorized agreements on particular outcomes. They agree on the result and on relatively narrow or low-level explanations for it. They need not agree on fundamental principle. They do not offer larger or more abstract explanations than are necessary to decide the case.”(pp. 1735-1736, emphasis in original)

An “incompletely theorized agreement” is most often a multiply theorized agreement.

This is, to a large degree, true of the DJJ sentencing meetings as well. The various reports prepared by the specialists in the DJJ staff are the highly standardized result of the thoroughly bureaucratized world of social work. The sentencing meeting then becomes the culmination of the efforts of those various specialists. The point is not to resolve the differences in their opinions of what the problem is but to gather them. Due process guarantees only procedural justice. It does not promise to resolve the substantive concerns of any one case. Social psychological research unsettlingly suggests that procedural justice is often enough to

satisfy our sense that justice has been in fact served, even when the “justice outcome” is not in our favor (Tyler 2006).

But perhaps the problem runs deeper than that. One upper level administrator described the DJJ as a “catch-all” for the various sister agencies’ trouble cases. The Office of Social Services, the Office of Mental Health, and even the courts and their probation officers often pass the buck to the DJJ. “The good thing,” this administrator explained, “is that we’re stuck with them. We have to figure out what to do with them.” Doing “justice” in such a context is necessarily ambiguous and uncertain. The sentencing meetings provide a moment when there is a veneer of clarity and certainty about what the problem is and what the solution is. The problems and solutions might be fuzzy (e.g. “has a lot of issues” or “needs to work on some issues”) but that’s because any sense of justice might get lost in the face of too many details.

CONCLUSION

To give an idea of how uncertain, how supplemental, how accidental “the meaning” of punishment is, and how one and the same procedure can be employed, interpreted, adapted to ends that differ fundamentally, I set down here the pattern that has emerged from the consideration of relatively few chance instances I have noted. Punishment as a means of rendering harmless, of preventing further harm. Punishment as recompense to the injured party for the harm done, rendered in any form (even in that of a compensating affect). Punishment as the isolation of a disturbance of equilibrium, so as to guard against any further spread of the disturbance. Punishment as a means of inspiring fear of those who determine and execute punishment. Punishment as a kind of repayment for the advantages a criminal has enjoyed hitherto (for example, when he is employed as a slave in the mines). Punishment as the expulsion of a degenerate element...Punishment as a festival, namely as the rape and mockery of a finally defeated enemy. Punishment as the making of a memory, whether for him who suffers the punishment—so-called “improvement”—or for those who witness its execution. Punishment as payment of a fee stipulated by the power that protects the wrongdoer from the excesses of revenge. Punishment as a compromise with revenge in its natural state when the latter is still maintained and claimed as a privilege by powerful clans. Punishment as a declaration of

war and a war measure against an enemy of peace, of the law, of order, of the authorities, whom, as a danger to the community, as one who has broken the contract that defines the conditions under which it exists, as a rebel, a traitor, and breaker of the peace, one opposes with the means of war.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II, 13

Nietzsche characterized punishment as not having one meaning but a “synthesis of meanings”. He pointed out: “one can still perceive how in each individual case the elements of the synthesis undergo a shift in value and rearrange themselves accordingly” ([1887] 1967: 80). The same punishment could come to mean several things. To Nietzsche, such an arbitrary, fluid understanding of punishment seemed to be yet further evidence of society’s “bad conscience,” the sticky residue of the resentful Judeo-Christian morality. This causes him to miss the more significant part of the problem. Our capacity to elaborate on the idea of justice far outstrips our capacity to “do justice” in the real world.

Take the problem of sentencing at the DJJ. The DJJ staff members generally arrive at the sentencing meeting with an overabundance of information about the youth and his many problems and failings in so many facets of his life, yet the sentencing decision is really ultimately confined to a matter of differences in months. The richness of their understanding of the youth’s problems—and thus reasons for confining him—is mismatched against their capacity for taking action on those understandings. What does another month or two or three really mean? Will that extra time really make a difference? This is a highly imperfect response to an obviously complicated set of moral issues and social problems. The DJJ staff members I observed and spoke with knew this, yet they remained apparently invested in the assessment process and sentencing procedures.

If we think of these sentencing meetings as a kind of ritualized process, it is useful to think about the kind of idealized vision of the world they offer. That idealized vision seems to be about ensuring that this sentencing decision is the right one because, on the one hand, the DJJ staff members have correctly identified the youth's problems and offered him the right kind of help, and on the other, the youth has the capacity as a moral agent to recognize his need to reform and thus make the necessary changes in his attitude and behavior. These are obviously fictions, but useful fictions for both the staff and the young men they sentence. It has an element of hope in the face of a tragic problem—the staff members hope they are doing the right thing and they are offering hope that this young man before them might indeed turn his life around, in spite of whatever circumstances surrounding him.

Drawing on Goffman's idea of surface agreement, and considering the ideas of ritual and formal organization more broadly, I have argued that not only is actual agreement not necessary for coordinated action to take place, but such a lack of deep agreement is the hallmark of organizational life. I have presented a strong empirical case that demonstrates just this point. The staff members draw on multiple rationales to justify a largely pre-determined sentence without regard to the tensions and contradictions among the various rationales. The strong surface agreement created by the largely ritualized sentencing meeting makes allows the staff to act *as if* all of these rationales hold together and *as if* the sentence they are handing down is the right one. In the face of such an ambiguous and uncertain task, with so many audiences making claims for different justice rationales, such a ritualized performance gets the imperfect machinery of justice to move inevitably forward—by getting those involved to agree what to do, but not why.

Chapter Four

Organizing StreetSafe

Introduction

This chapter examines the case of an experimental pilot gang intervention program, StreetSafe Boston. StreetSafe attempts to combine the immediate impact of the street-level violence disruption and intervention tactics of Street Work with the long-term impact of Social Service Delivery (such as education, job training, legal counsel, health services, and housing) to help gang members get the help that they need to live lives as respectable citizens. As a new, emerging organization, StreetSafe faces the dual challenge of making sure that its novel approach to the problem of gang intervention is working and that its various organizational parts are working together effectively.

While at first glance this combination of Street Work and Service Delivery appear to be complementary, the two sides of the organization struggled to work together effectively with any consistency. The practical demands of Street Work and Service Delivery pulled the organization's approach to the problem of gang intervention in different directions. Not only did their practical activities often put them at odds, but StreetSafe's members also understood the problems that the organization faced in fundamentally different ways. These practical and conceptual differences in turn fueled personal disagreements among some of StreetSafe's members, resulting in emotional tensions that also interfered with the members' ability to work together. This apparent inability to work together risked making moot the question of whether or not StreetSafe's novel approach to the problem of gang intervention was effective.

The case of StreetSafe puts the problem of coordination front and center. A failure to coordinate effectively threatened to undermine the goals of the organization. The question of

how to get people to work together effectively loomed large. Within organizational studies, there are generally two broad approaches to thinking about getting organization members to work together. Either a coherent interpretation of the problem at hand is imposed, top-down from the organization's leadership, or organizational members come to a shared understanding of the problem at hand through some kind of consensual, deliberative sense-making processes. Both of these approaches make the assumption that a shared interpretation of the problem at hand is somehow necessary for the effective coordination of action. StreetSafe, as an organization facing practical, conceptual, and emotional barriers to effective coordination of its members, is an excellent case for examining not only the relationship between interpretation and coordination, but also the role of formal organizational authority in the problems of interpretation and coordination.

When StreetSafe's parts begin to work together more effectively, there is little evidence of a shared understanding of the problem of gang intervention, either imposed from the top-down, or developing from the ground-up. Instead, StreetSafe's members begin to coordinate more effectively along the emotional and practical dimensions, facilitated in large part the efforts of the organization's leadership to professionalize and formalize relationships among the organization's members. The formal rules, standards, and measures embraced by the organization's management do not necessarily eliminate the differing interpretations within the organization, but instead impose a set of mutually recognized practical demands on organizational members that allow them to coordinate without a shared understanding of the problem.

This chapter explores how StreetSafe struggled with the problem of coordination and how it managed to overcome those struggles. To do this, I will first present a basic description of

the organization to provide some sense of context. Next, I will provide a brief note on data and methods. I will then present a portrait of some of the key barriers to effectively coordinating that StreetSafe initially faced. I will then explore the existing theoretical literature relevant to the problem of coordination faced by StreetSafe. I then will show how members of StreetSafe began to more effectively coordinate and how it deviates from the existing theoretical explanations. Finally, I will discuss what the case of StreetSafe tells us about the problems of coordination and interpretation.

The Context: StreetSafe Boston

StreetSafe Boston is a pilot gang intervention/social service organization that works with some of Boston's most violent gangs in some of the city's neighborhoods most affected by violent crime. Rather than targeting "at risk youth"—an overly inclusive term that applies to most youth living in an urban environment—StreetSafe works with "Proven Risk Individuals" [PRIs], adolescents and young men and women with known criminal records and active (and often violent) involvement in a neighborhood gang. The basic idea driving StreetSafe is this: a small percentage of young men (mostly young men, though young women do play significant roles) involved in the city's neighborhood gangs are responsible for an overwhelming majority of the shootings and homicides in Boston. If one targets that small percentage of gang-involved individuals, then one can make a dramatic impact on the number of shootings and homicides citywide. With that in mind, The Boston Foundation, the private civic foundation funding StreetSafe Boston, charged the pilot organization with the mandate of reducing the number of gang-related shootings and homicides in five targeted neighborhoods within five years.

Faced with this daunting task, StreetSafe uses a two-pronged strategy, reflected in the organization's two basic units: Street Work and Service Delivery. StreetSafe deploys around sixteen³² Street Workers—typically community members, and often former gang members themselves—to engage currently active members of the target gangs in the five target neighborhoods in the hope of both intervening in any potentially violent conflicts and encouraging these gang members to leave behind the violent lifestyle of the streets. StreetSafe also has a small number of professionals dedicated to helping StreetSafe-involved gang members, or PRIs, receive services and employment opportunities to which they might not otherwise have access. There are several Program Coordinators³³ [similar to case managers], who work to connect PRIs to existing service programs in a variety of areas, including educational programs, job training, legal services, housing, and health services (including mental health services). There is also a Workforce Development Manager, who works with local businesses to get job and career opportunities for the PRIs looking for legitimate employment. Ideally, the Street Worker builds a strong enough relationship with the PRI to convince him³⁴ to leave behind the gang lifestyle and brings the PRI “into the fold.” The Street Worker will pass the PRI onto the Program Coordinator, who works with the PRI to connect him with various services he might be interested in or need. The Program Coordinator may then in turn decide if the PRI is “job ready” and work with the Workforce Development Manager to help the PRI find long-term, stable employment.

³² The number of Street Workers changed throughout the period of observation due to a variety of personnel changes, including firings, hirings, and organizational restructurings.

³³ The number of Program Coordinators changed throughout the period of observation, ranging from five to two, before settling on four, plus a manager.

³⁴ The overwhelming majority of PRIs are young men in their late teens to late twenties. StreetSafe does work with some women PRIs, but their numbers can be counted on one hand. While the problems of these young women are taken as every bit as seriously as their male counterparts, the organization is generally oriented to thinking about the problems young black and Latino men face.

At first glance, StreetSafe appears to have a relatively straightforward and thoughtful organizational design aimed at addressing what many consider some of the short and long-term problems associated with the deeply entrenched structural and cultural forces driving gang violence in inner city communities. StreetSafe attempts to disrupt the immediate problem of retaliatory violence, while at the same time offering to help these young men take the concrete, practical steps necessary to overcome, in the long run, whatever economic, structural, cultural, or personal barriers that may be keeping them tied to the life of the streets. On closer inspection, one quickly finds that getting StreetSafe's various organizational parts to move together in realization of these goals proved to be an enormous challenge in the organizations' first few years. Street Workers and Program Coordinators had competing understandings of the PRIs' main problems, so they also had different understandings of how StreetSafe should go about its work. In the absence of clear leadership or direction from on top, individuals struggled to work collectively as they often blurred the boundaries of roles and responsibilities and often flaunted or circumvented whatever formal processes that were in place. As a result, communication broke down, confusion over who was or should be doing what became commonplace, and personal tensions and conflicts emerged, bleeding into the work itself. In work where, as many at StreetSafe say, "lives are at stake," the inability to coordinate the organization's various parts threatened to undermine its noble ambitions.

StreetSafe Boston, as an experimental pilot program, is a great example of an emerging organization (Katz and Gardner 1988). In its initial years, StreetSafe lacked the clear and consistent formal structures, processes, and rules typically associated with established organizations. It was also clear that the different sides of the organization—Street Work and Service Delivery—had a difficult time working together consistently. Three kinds of barriers

stood in the way of effective coordination between the two sides of organization: practical, conceptual, and emotional. Officially defining the practical responsibilities of both the Street Workers and Program Coordinators, as well as the obligations that they had to each other and the PRIs, proved especially difficult. Street Workers and Programs Coordinators alike often saw the apparent rigidity and formality of roles, rules, and processes as potential barriers to working with the PRIs effectively. The Street Workers and Program Coordinators also had very different ideas of what it meant to work with the PRIs effectively. Street Workers, facing the pressure of bringing these gang members into the organization voluntarily, often used the promise of jobs, services, and stipends as motivation for the PRIs to work with StreetSafe. Program Coordinators preferred to talk about changes in the PRI's "mindset" and the need for intrinsic motivation to drive the PRI to make the necessary changes, sacrifices, and commitments it would take to get a GED [General Education Development, or high school equivalency exam], go through a job training program, get a job, and so on. These two different conceptualizations of StreetSafe's work often became points of contention. In addition to the practical problems and conceptual differences, a strong negative emotional tenor between some Street Workers and Program Coordinators often disrupted official interactions and meetings, disrupting the ability of the two sides to work together. I will explore these problems, as well as how StreetSafe overcame them, later on.

Note on Data and Methods

The data used in this paper come primarily from my field notes, based on observations at StreetSafe Boston from September 2011 to June 2012. A majority of my notes come from a variety of meetings involving Program Coordinators, held in the StreetSafe offices. This

includes weekly Program Coordinator meetings, as well as various monthly or biweekly meetings among the five Community Units [that is, the Program Coordinator and group of Street Workers responsible for one of the particular five focus areas], which often involved a variety of managers, and StreetSafe's executive director, as well as the occasional outsiders. I also met with the various Program Coordinators³⁵ outside of these meetings, talking to them one-on-one, and shadowing them as they went about their work in their neighborhood-based offices, the neighborhoods themselves, and around the city of Boston. The Program Coordinators work often involved meeting with PRIs, meeting with Street Workers, and meeting with people from other community-based organizations and service providers. These observed interactions took place in their official neighborhood-based offices, in the car as they were taking a PRI to a job interview, in the offices of some other service provider, in a nearby café, and so on. Beyond these observations, conversations, and informal, unstructured interviews, I also rely on a variety of official documents produced and used by members of StreetSafe that were given to me.

Given the circumstances of my field observations as well as the comfort level of my informants, I relied primarily on handwritten notes, which I took during the meetings that I observed or during conversations that I had with particular individuals. Upon returning from the field, I would take these extensive, shorthand "jottings" and elaborate them, as soon as practically possible, as per standard field note practice (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). While such note taking methods have their obvious limitations (e.g. reliance on the faulty tools of perception and memory), I am confident that my sustained presence in the field helped erode, or at least cover up, whatever holes there might be in my perceptions and memories. However, as

³⁵ There were seven different individuals who worked in these positions at different points; the number of positions began at five, went down to four, and then two after several departures. The number again returned to four Program Coordinators to cover the five focus areas when StreetSafe hired two new people for the position.

often is the case for someone employing field methods, there is a looming question of just how my own personal presence affected the quality of my observations. I address that more fully next.

Late in the summer of 2010, I joined a Harvard-based research team that The Boston Foundation had hired to help develop and evaluate the five-year StreetSafe pilot program. The research team had been involved with the StreetSafe initiative since its inception in 2008. The team not only had an overarching evaluation plan in place, but they also played a key role in giving shape to StreetSafe's efforts. In particular, they convinced The Boston Foundation to limit StreetSafe's focus to particular gangs in particular neighborhoods, allowing for a quasi-experimental design for evaluating both the gang/group and neighborhood level impact of StreetSafe's efforts. Ultimately, the research team's evaluation centers on whether or not StreetSafe's combination of street work and service delivery contributes to a significant reduction in the number of gang-related shootings and youth homicides in its five focus areas. I stepped into things midstream. My role on the research team was somewhat peripheral to these criminological outcomes. While one colleague focused on the Street Workers, I focused on the Service Delivery—that is, the work of the Program Coordinators in particular, as well as the Workforce Development Manager—with the eye of an organizational ethnographer. If the efforts of StreetSafe were (or were not) contributing to some reduction in violence in these areas, it was in part my responsibility to capture what was and was not working in its offices (rather than among the Street Workers out on the streets, which was the purview of a colleague), from an organizational perspective, that might be contributing to the observed results.

For my part, I certainly made every attempt to cultivate an image of being a genial and sympathetic observer, as well as being critical but fair-minded. My presence, as a member of the

evaluation team, was essentially imposed on the Program Coordinators and other staff members. I tried to be friendly and personable, as one would expect from a colleague. But this also meant making sure it was clear that while I was there to observe their work, I also accepted certain limits and boundaries in observing and would not impose my presence where it was not wanted or invited. For example, I never attended one-on-one meetings between the Program Coordinators and their Manager. During most of the meetings that I observed, I would usually sit at the same table as my informants—though sometimes I would be off to the side—and quietly observe and take notes. Occasionally, especially as I became seen as a regular fixture at the Program Coordinator meetings, I would be asked to, or on my own, break the observer role, usually to clarify some part of the evaluation (such as why some neighborhood-level crime data were being used) or perhaps even define or clarify some term from psychology or sociology that was under discussion. Although my presence among the Program Coordinators was accepted, I would still occasionally have a group become “self-conscious” of my presence, as a manager or Street Worker unaccustomed to my presence, might comment or joke about my presence or my note taking (and given the amount of turnover during the period of observation, this would happen throughout that time). I would usually respond by explaining who I was and what my purpose was there, and someone else in the group might vouch for me, and the meeting would move on without further mention.

I thought of and tried to explain the goal of my observations as an attempt to understand the challenges they face, how they understand the work they do, and so on. I was certainly sympathetic to the practical and moral challenges of working with a heavily gang-involved population, and felt comfortable in expressing such sympathy. I made no pretensions about understanding how to go about doing such work better or more effectively and made every effort

to express this. I think taking this kind of position as an observer, who rarely, if ever, offered advice or direction, rather than an evaluator, had some resonance with my informants over time. Outside of official meetings, in group conversations or informal one-on-one meetings, I often engaged my informants about the challenges of some particular case or the paradoxes of the work in general. While I expressed my sympathy toward the Program Coordinators' complaints about the PRIs, the Street Workers, or even the StreetSafe leadership, I also made sure to cultivate the habit of playing the devil's advocate, taking the position of the other person, especially in informal conversations. At one point, one of my informants commented directly to me about how he appreciated the fact that I did this, but I can make no claims otherwise to how successful my self-presentation was. At the end of the day, I think that the demands of doing the difficult and important work of trying to get young men and women to leave behind the life of the streets for the lives of productive citizenry outweighed whatever disturbance my presence might have had, however problematic perceptions of my ascribed identity might be for the situation.

StreetSafe Emerging

By the time I joined the research team, StreetSafe Boston had already effectively gotten off the ground, but it was still very much a fledgling organization (as I would quickly find out). StreetSafe began not as a clear, well-defined plan, but a mixture of plans, ambitions, expectations, assumptions, and compromises. When I began my field work, the organization was still very much in the process of taking shape. However, those early experiences had already played a key role defining what shape the organization could and would take. The aim of this section is to provide a sense of both some of the key contextual details of StreetSafe's

beginnings as well as the resulting practical struggles faced in doing StreetSafe's work. StreetSafe's early days resemble in many ways the "garbage can model" (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972; March 1987; March 1994) of an organization, where information and decision-making are loosely coupled, problems search for solutions, solutions search for problems, and so on. Not only did people have different understandings about how to go about StreetSafe's work, they also had different understandings about how they needed to go about StreetSafe's work collectively. In other words, people lacked a shared understanding of the problem, as well as a clear sense of how they should work together.

Rolling Out

StreetSafe Boston began as an initiative of The Boston Foundation, a community foundation that funds research, provides grants to a variety of community based organizations, and offers guidance for local leadership, as well local philanthropic efforts, in the Boston area.³⁶ Just what StreetSafe was to be was a point of discussion and debate among funders, researchers, local leaders, and community members. The City of Boston already had its own street worker program, but the perception was that its affiliation with the city government handcuffed the program. First, government rules basically prevented the hiring of anybody with a criminal record. Second, like other public sectors employees in the area, the City Street Workers unionized and effectively turned street work into a nine-to-five job. As a private organization, The Boston Foundation is free from these constraints. They could hire former gang members from the neighborhoods and gangs that they would be targeting. In theory, these former gang members have an easier time forming relationships with the current gang members and be more

³⁶ This information is from The Boston Foundation's website (accessed June 18, 2012): <http://www.tbf.org/AboutTBF/AboutTBFHome.aspx>

effective in persuading them to abandon their violent and criminal ways. In addition to this, the StreetSafe Street Workers could be out on the street at night, during those hours the gang members would most likely be out and about.

But StreetSafe Boston was not going to be just another Street Work program. StreetSafe was also going to help these gang members gain access to the kinds of resources that would enable them to leave behind the life of the streets, a life of crime. The story was that many of the existing community-based organizations in the Boston area essentially creamed from the inner city communities, helping “at risk” youth who happened to live in a troubled neighborhood instead of actual gang members responsible for the crime and violence. Faced with funders’ pressures to produce results or demonstrable outcomes, it was in the interest of these organizations to select the youth with whom it was easier to work. StreetSafe hired professionals whose specific job it was to work with existing community-based organizations to open the doors to StreetSafe’s Proven Risk Individuals. These professionals act as middlemen between the Street Workers, who sought out the PRIs directly, and these other community-based organizations. Rather than creating a redundant set of services for this population (at an untold cost), the idea was to leverage existing programs and services.

This basic sketch of an organizational framework—with Street Work on one side and Service Delivery on the other—we can see some basic assumptions about the work StreetSafe was to do. The problem of gang membership, as well as attendant participation in crime and violence, is framed as largely a *structural* problem. If the gang members are allowed access to educational services, job training, etc—that is, the legitimate means to income—then they would have strong motivation for leaving behind the life of the streets and whatever illegitimate means

that they may have had to resort to in the past.³⁷ Accompanying this basic assumption about the problem are assumptions about the efficacy of the various services and programs. In essence, StreetSafe is built around the assumption that these programs are effective with the population in general, let alone StreetSafe's proven-risk population. Underlying all of these assumptions, again, are rough ideas about how people work, human motivation, and how and why people change their behavior.

I mention all of this not necessarily as a criticism of StreetSafe, but to point out that in creating a program of this sort, people never truly build from the ground up. They begin with established—and perhaps, flawed—understandings of the problem at hand and how to go about solving it. For an individual encountering the world, the process of learning and correcting one's mistaken assumptions is a relatively straightforward (if occasionally painful) process. For an organization, the process is much more problematic. These kinds of assumptions play a key role in not only defining what people will do, but also what the structure of the organization will look like. It thus often becomes a challenge to disentangle the troubles in effective coordination among an organization's parts from trouble with the organization's basic interpretations of the problems it faces and the solutions it offers.

Beyond this set of broad assumptions about the problem, StreetSafe was also shaped by the political and practical circumstances of Boston. As one might expect, rolling out a new program such as StreetSafe was fraught with a certain amount of political tension. Community members, existing community-based organizations, and even the City of Boston and its various social programs had a wide array of expectations for this initiative backed by the prestigious Boston Foundation. In the planning stages of the initiative, The Boston Foundation had a few

³⁷ The persistence of the Mertonian notion of anomie (Merton 1938) as an explanation for crime (especially black, inner-city crime) among the educated and elite, despite decades of sociological and criminological evidence to the contrary, is itself worthy of greater sociological attention.

members of the StreetSafe initiative meet with local leaders, members of community-based organization, and community members in the various neighborhoods. For some organizations and people in the community, one member of StreetSafe later explained to me, there was some perception that The Boston Foundation was dumping money into these communities, and that they needed to “get a piece of the pie.” Moreover, there was some perception that, at these early stages, in order to get community members and other organizations on board, StreetSafe perhaps made promises to people and organizations that they could not keep. On top of this, when StreetSafe, in the interest of helping the evaluation of the program stand on more solid ground, decided to use its limited resources on only particular groups in particular focus areas, there was some backlash and criticism from the community, as well as members of StreetSafe itself.

Central to all of these actions was that StreetSafe was trying to establish its legitimacy within the community, among its peer organizations and potential partners, and with the City of Boston. From a practical point of view, it needed the cooperation of these various actors in order to do the kind of intervention and service work that it set out to do. These practical concerns, as well as the political realities, invariably shaped what StreetSafe was becoming. In its early days, the members of StreetSafe were not just figuring out how to do Street Work or how to go about providing effective Service Delivery. They were trying to figure out their work under the constraints of these initial decisions and commitments—some of which had nothing to do with the work itself. Moreover, the Street Workers and Program Coordinators alike inherited the reputational perceptions of these early decisions. Some community members, as well as community-based services and programs, did not necessarily understand why StreetSafe could only serve only particular young people from a particular gang, but not young people from the gang one block over. For some, such distinctions, which were put in place to provide more

scientific rigor to the evaluation of StreetSafe's efforts, were an affront to the perceived needs of the community. In the eyes of some, his tarnished StreetSafe's reputation and put the Street Workers and Program Coordinators in a compromising situation not only for the purposes of the work, but occasionally in their personal lives as well, as many of them lived in the communities and knew people who needed or asked for help. Street Workers and Program Coordinators alike did not necessarily appreciate the logic that served the purposes of evaluation, and struggled to maintain what, in their eyes, appeared to be arbitrary boundaries around their work.

So as StreetSafe was rolling out as an initiative and becoming an organization, it was, in essence, a loosely held together collection of assumptions, choices, and practical and political compromises. These various pieces did not necessarily all hold together to form a clear, coherent plan, but they provided some of the basic content and shape of how members of StreetSafe would go about doing their work. As one might expect from any kind of pilot program or initiative, one has to begin somewhere, with some basic assumptions about how the world works and how one's organization is going to go about doing its work. These assumptions might be mistaken, and one's view about how the world works might not be entirely accurate. But, as we can see with StreetSafe, there are also decisions and commitments made that bind the organization's future courses of action that may not have a direct relationship to the problem one wishes to address.

Such compromises, while not necessarily ideal, are a normal part of operating in a complex, political world. However, these kinds of decisions and commitments also become intertwined with how the organization experiences and deals with the problem. When things do not go as well as planned, it becomes difficult to figure out if the organization is not succeeding because one's approach to the problem is wrong, or if the organization is, in essence, working

with the wrong tools (e.g. partners). A lot of organizational time and energy can be devoted to making the tools work without allowing for the possibility that the organization might not have the right tools. One of the key insights of the garbage can model of organizations is the realization that organizational actors often must make do with this kind of messiness, working on the problems and with the solutions that are most immediately and easily available. In the case of StreetSafe, the practices that would come to constitute the organization not only confronted a set of basic assumptions about the work that proved to be questionable, putting strain on the organization's capacity to coordinate its members, but they also had to work with and around a set of obligations and constraints that were often extraneous to organization's primary tasks.

In describing the various assumptions and compromises that initially defined StreetSafe's efforts, my goal is not to suggest that this could have been done better, that better planning, or more or fewer compromises would result in a more effective organization. Instead I want to suggest that just what exactly StreetSafe was trying to do, and what it could do given the various practical constraints that it faced, was in the process of unfolding. The initiative had to act. But the course and shape of those actions had been predetermined to some degree by those initial assumptions, commitments, and compromises. The point is not whether those assumptions, commitments, or compromises should or shouldn't have been made, but that they are formative in not only how StreetSafe begins to make sense of its work but in how StreetSafe works as an organization. In the next section, I will detail how those courses of action began to unfold.

How does StreetSafe work?

Once the work of StreetSafe began, the Street Workers, Program Coordinators, and the rest of the members of the organization would confront a variety of challenges in putting a bunch

of ideas into practice. Some of the challenges had to do with the disconnect between how the problem itself was imagined and the realities of working with this proven-risk population. Some of the challenges had to do with managing some of the commitments and resources, whose fit with the goals of StreetSafe was not quite clear. But perhaps the biggest source of difficulty lay in the inability of the StreetSafe's parts—namely, Street Work and Service Delivery—to work together effectively. Motivated in part by the practical demands of their jobs, as well as some combination of prior experiences and assumptions about the PRIs, Street Workers and Program Coordinators developed incompatible views of just how StreetSafe, as an organization, should work. This, in turn, influenced their expectations of how they were to work with one another.

The work of the Street Workers and Program Coordinators was, in theory, supposed to be interconnected. The Street Workers were to go out onto the streets, identify and meet with targeted gang members, and ultimately persuade them to put down the guns, let go of gang rivalries and longstanding disputes, and stop participating in the life of crime and violence. Beyond what we might consider the immediate goal of violence intervention, Street Workers were also supposed to bring these gang members, or PRIs, “into the fold” of StreetSafe's Service Delivery. They funnel PRIs whom they had deemed “Service Ready”—that is, amenable to the idea of taking part in a GED class, a job training program, etc.—to the Program Coordinators. The Program Coordinators, who were working with existing services and programs, then help the PRI get into the appropriate program, thereby serving the more long-term goal of enabling the PRIs to leave behind the life of the street for a life of respectable citizenry. Each of StreetSafe's five focus areas would have a small group of Street Workers (about three or four, depending on the number and size of focus groups/gangs) and one Program Coordinator working together with that area's identified PRIs.

This relatively simplified view of how the process ought to work was quickly complicated by the practical realities encountered in the work. There were three interrelated problems that unfolded in the course of actually doing the work. The first problem was the lack of clear distinction between the responsibilities of the Street Workers and Program Coordinators. The second problem was the fact that both groups relied on distinct models of motivation to understand how StreetSafe should be working with the PRIs. The third problem was the tense emotional tenor that developed between the two groups. For practical purposes, these three problems were deeply intertwined, but for the current analytic purposes, I think it useful to examine each of them separately. The larger point here is that, along several dimensions—practical, conceptual, and emotional—StreetSafe was not really working as an organization.

The Problem of Lanes

One of the key things to realize about StreetSafe is that a PRI's involvement with the organization is strictly voluntary. StreetSafe has no official relationship with the authorities—the police, the court, the probation or parole offices, etc.—so no one had the official power to compel an individual to work with the organization. Given StreetSafe's structure, the responsibility of persuading these gang members to listen to and work with StreetSafe falls primarily on the Street Workers. Street Workers are the frontline of the organization, out on the streets, meeting with gang members, and trying to convince these PRIs to not only listen to them (in matters of violence intervention) but also possibly to become more involved with the organization that might connect them to services and legitimate employment. Conceiving this problem as strictly structural (that is, these gang members only lack access to the resources, not

motivation to leave behind the life of the streets) underplays the need for and role of persuasion in this work.

The Street Workers quickly discovered that in order to meet the organizational expectation of bringing PRIs “into the fold” that they needed to rely on their reputation within the community and on the streets, as well as persistence, charm, and whatever other personal attributes that they might possess to convince these gang members (some more hardened and deeply involved in the lifestyle than others) to work with yet another organization bent on saving them. Not only were many PRIs not “service ready”—that is, they had little interest in the promise of education or legitimate employment or whatever other services StreetSafe might offer—but many had been burned before by similar organizations and programs that had, in their eyes, given them little else but false promises. Certainly, there was a degree of variation in the Street Workers’ individual skill and capacity to engage the PRIs successfully enough to persuade them (which would become an issue later on), but it is important to recognize that such work draws on the person rather than the official role. The likelihood of a PRI listening to a Street Worker has much more to do with the relationship he has with the Street Worker than whatever reputation StreetSafe might have. The issue of interpersonal trust is paramount in this situation.

The formal features of the organization, however loosely defined they were in StreetSafe’s first year, became seen as largely external to these personal relationships. The simple idea that Street Workers might build up a relationship with a PRI and then pass the PRI off to the Program Coordinator—reflective of StreetSafe’s basic division of labor—became somewhat problematic. Some Street Workers failed to see what Program Coordinators could contribute to the process of helping the PRIs. Some began to do the kind of work expected of the Program Coordinators, such as helping PRIs connect with programs that they might know about,

taking the PRIs to fill out job applications, and even skipping over the Program Coordinators and taking the PRIs directly to the Workforce Development Manager in the hopes of getting the PRI a job. Some Street Workers were blurring the lines between Street Work and Service Delivery.

The Program Coordinators were very much aware that they were being cut out of these potential relationships with PRIs, and were, in effect, being prevented from doing their jobs. There were two general responses to this problem. The first was to formalize the obligations Street Workers had to the Program Coordinators. They basically wanted the Street Workers to report to the Program Coordinators, particularly when it came to working with PRIs whom the Street Workers had identified as service ready. However, there was reluctance in making the relationship between the Street Workers and Program Coordinators explicitly and strictly hierarchical. Even the Program Coordinators did not necessarily want supervisory or managerial responsibilities over the Street Workers in their focus areas. They just wanted the Street Workers to bring them in on cases where they might have the opportunity to do the work that they were supposed to do.

The second response from some of the Program Coordinators was to blur the lines between Street Work and Service Delivery themselves. A few of the Program Coordinators had the relevant experience (e.g. criminal pasts), reputation within the community, and personal skills and charms to engage the PRIs in the same way that the Street Workers were expected to do. They began to engage in Street Work part of the time, not just to make connections to the PRIs that the Street Workers weren't providing for them, but also, in their opinion, to engage the PRIs more effectively than some of the Street Workers were. Because their official role at StreetSafe put them in contact with more services and programs that could help the PRIs in the

long term, they saw building these kinds of personal relationships with the PRIs as a necessary part of helping these young men (and women, to a much lesser degree) turn their lives around.

As one might expect, this blurring of responsibilities between the two roles caused conflict and confusion in the organization. StreetSafe's managers eventually called for the Street Workers and Program Coordinators to "stay in your lanes"—that is, they should stick to their officially defined responsibilities. For the first few years of the organization's life, the call to stay in lanes was met with skepticism, criticism, and resistance. Even StreetSafe's managers would occasionally backtrack on the official order, only to return to it again once more. So why were lanes so difficult to stick to? At issue was an ongoing ambivalence toward the formal roles, rules, and processes of the organization.

On the one hand, the skirting of official role responsibilities and channels of action contributed directly to some problems. There were some incidents in which Street Workers went around the Program Coordinators, circumventing the official process, to help their PRIs get employment or in a program, only to have those PRIs make terrible mistakes on the job or in the program, damaging StreetSafe's organizational reputation as well as potential long-term partnerships with the organization. The argument from the Program Coordinators and the Workforce Development Manager was that an official process and protocol—that is, regular meetings with PRIs interested in employment, informational and screening interviews, along with appropriate paperwork—did a better job at screening out those who weren't "service ready" or "job ready." This call for following a formalized process was not just about questioning the judgment of the Street Workers (this was part of it—but that will be addressed in the next section), but it was also founded on the argument that putting the PRIs through the demands of regularly scheduled meetings and probing conversations before just giving them a job would

help screen out those who were not seriously committed to making the necessary changes in their lifestyle to participate in regular, legitimate employment.

On the other hand, there developed a counter-narrative among the Street Workers and Program Coordinators alike that adhering to formal roles, rules, and processes too strictly could interfere with their efforts to help the PRIs. The perception was that their ability to convince a PRI to put down a gun, to put aside gang rivalries, to make a commitment to a GED class or job training program, and so on, hinged largely on their personal relationship with the PRI. And for the Program Coordinators in particular, the problem of recommending a PRI to an outside program or to the Workforce Development Manager for employment also depended heavily on their personal judgment of the PRI—something that could only be established with some semblance of regular personal contact (something that some of the Street Workers were not always allowing them to have). What came to be the experience of doing the job—and doing the job well—was seen as largely separate from any formal requirements of the organization. Getting to know a PRI in order to help him was distinct from having to fill out the necessary paperwork so that StreetSafe could help him. Following the officially defined roles, rules, and processes might not only prevent one from making the necessary personal connection to the PRI, but it might also unnecessarily slow down the process of helping the PRI. Being seen as effective and helpful, rather than slow and overly officious or bureaucratic, was an important part of the persuasive persona. The narrative of “doing whatever it takes” to help a PRI persisted, despite repeated calls to stay in lanes. Even when StreetSafe later hired an Executive Director and the organization’s leadership began to stabilize, the Executive Director himself, at first, supported the sentiment that the official rules and processes should not be preventing them from helping

someone. A sense of urgency—the notion that “lives are at stake” in StreetSafe’s work—had a way of putting the formal features of StreetSafe as an organization in perspective.

The key point to all of this is that, from the perspective of the individual practitioners (Street Workers and Program Coordinators), the demands of the work with the PRIs did not necessarily map onto formal relations and processes of the organization. This is probably not an unusual experience within the world of social services. However, it presents a particular challenge when the organization’s various pieces are supposed to work together. For lack of a better term, there wasn’t a *natural* interdependency in the work of the Street Workers and Program Coordinators that could be reflected in the formal structure of the organization. Staying in lanes may have helped the organization work better as whole, especially when dealing with a larger, sustained caseload, but it did not necessarily make sense from the point of view that practices that developed on the ground. Formal expectations of coordinated roles did not necessarily result in sustained coordinating practices.

Differing Perspectives on the Problem

The Street Workers and Service Delivery had very different understandings of how StreetSafe should work as an organization in part because they had very different understandings of the nature of the problem that the organization was trying to solve. The overall task of Street Workers and Service Delivery was to change the behavior of the gang members, or PRIs, they were working with. Such a task necessarily involves some assumptions about human behavior and the human mind. Much of the world of social services is filled with folk psychologies and folk sociologies, or local, often *ad hoc* theories and explanations for clients’ behavior, decisions, beliefs, etc, as well as theories and explanations for particular processes, behavioral

interventions, and.³⁸ In this sense, those working at Street Safe were no different from their colleagues in other social service programs. What is of particular interest in the case of StreetSafe is how these different conceptualizations of the problem are reflected in the organization's division of labor. Such different understandings of the problem and its solution, rooted in the different practical demands of the work, present a barrier to developing a shared understanding of what the problem is and how the two different groups should work together.

It is important to keep in mind that the structure of StreetSafe put very different pressures on the Street Workers and Service Delivery. The Street Workers had to do what they could to bring as many targeted gang members into the fold of StreetSafe. This meant relying on whatever personal reputation and charm that they might have to convince the gang members to listen to them. It also meant—for some Street Workers more than others—relying on the promise of services and more importantly, jobs that StreetSafe could provide for them. Some Street Workers began to “lead with services” or “lead with jobs” when trying to make connections to the PRIs. Program Coordinators and even StreetSafe's managers would eventually criticize this practice and try to do away with it, but not before it became a relatively common tactic, especially among those Street Workers who may have lacked the reputation or interpersonal skills to relate and connect with the PRIs in a more personal and less instrumental way.

Program Coordinators were in a different position. While the biggest part of their job was to help connect interested PRIs to existing programs and organizations, as well as potential job opportunities, they also had to build effective, potentially long-term relationships with outside

³⁸ The use of the term “folk” is not intended to be pejorative, but merely to indicate its distinction from the more rigorous ideas and explanations produced by professional social scientists. There is a larger issue here about how much of the work in social services is based on some mix of academic theories of human behavior, as well as local, folk theories people develop in practice. These attempts to put social scientific theories into practice—good and bad—is certainly worthy of more attention for many scientific, practical, and ethical reasons.

programs, organizations, and agencies. As previously noted, many organizations in the city generally avoided working with the proven-risk population that StreetSafe was targeting. Taking on one of StreetSafe's PRIs would potentially mean taking on some more risk—spending limited time and resources on someone who would seem to be more likely to fail, more likely to be a problem in class, more likely to drop out, and so on. In the increasingly competitive world of grantsmanship focused on outcomes, smaller programs cannot necessarily afford to take on too many clients who might throw off their numbers. When vouching for StreetSafe's clients, Program Coordinators often risked not only StreetSafe's organizational reputation, but their own personal reputation (as they often knew people from these community-based organizations from their personal and professional lives outside of StreetSafe) as well. While Program Coordinators certainly understood that part of their job was to prepare organizations for potential failures among their clients and to deal with the aftermath, they also wanted to minimize the risk of placing someone who wasn't "service ready" into a program so that they could continue to place StreetSafe clients into the program in the future.

The Workforce Development Manager also developed a similar attitude when it came to job placement. He placed pressure on the Program Coordinators and Street Workers alike to avoid sending him PRIs who were not "job ready." Some mistakes in StreetSafe's early days made it clear the potential cost for the organization of pushing PRIs into jobs without properly screening them. For example, two PRIs were arrested for selling marijuana while working on jobs that StreetSafe helped them get, effectively ending StreetSafe's future partnership with that employer. Because of these experiences, the Workforce Development Manager created an explicit set of criteria for "job readiness" that included things like no drug use, knowing how to properly dress for a job interview, capable of being on time, and so on.

To put it somewhat crudely, Street Workers, whose job it was bring in as many PRIs as possible, had an interest in lowering the bar for the PRIs, making the process as easy and rewarding for the PRIs as possible. The Program Coordinators and Workforce Development, who worked with outside organizations, had an interest in raising the bar for the PRIs, making the process of helping the PRIs in part a screening process. While people from both sides of the organization certainly thought about the PRIs in complex ways, it is no surprise that each side began to publicly favor particular interpretations of the PRIs that made their work easier. The Street Workers began to speak about the need for extrinsic rewards, such as the promise of jobs and stipends, to motivate the PRIs to work with StreetSafe and leave behind the life of the street. Such thinking was most easily seen in the tendency for some Street Workers to “lead with services” or “lead with jobs.” Street Workers, who spent most of their time with the PRIs, often faced the very real, very practical concern from the PRIs—what was in it for them to work with StreetSafe? Program Coordinators countered this by speaking about the importance of the PRI’s intrinsic motivation. In their view, whatever changes a PRI might make would not stick unless he was personally motivated to change for the sake of making changes to his or her life; making changes for the promise of some external reward was bound to fail, especially in the long run.

Here is an exchange from my field notes that captures this tension between one of the Program Coordinators and one of the Street Workers during one of their monthly Community Unit meetings:

[Street Worker 1] then asked [The Program Coordinator] about the possibility of getting a couple of the PRIs a stipend like they had done for others.

[The Program Coordinator] told him: “But they haven’t done anything yet.”

[Street Worker 2] seemed to grow slightly more frustrated, as he leaned forward and spoke emphatically and with more energy. He explained to [The Program Coordinator] that he thought they should be giving them a small stipend to encourage them and that these young men “need an incentive for doing well.” At least, that is what he saw “from the street point of view.”

[The Program Coordinator] replied sharply: “I’m not gonna pay some kid who’s not even going to school.” From here on out, the back and forth between [The Program Coordinator] and [Street

Worker 2] became more heated and emotional. The other SWs mostly kept their eyes down, glued to their Blackberries as they appeared to type text messages...

After [The Program Coordinator] made his position known, [Street Worker 2] spoke about meeting with the people from [A JOB TRAINING PROGRAM] with PRIs. He complained about how the people from [A JOB TRAINING PROGRAM] would point to all they did wrong. He complained: "Kids were just shutting down after." They would just pull up their hoodie and shut down.

[The Program Coordinator] replied defensively that the people from [THE JOB TRAINING PROGRAM] were "just following protocol." And he pointed out that the young men [Street Worker 2] was referring to "weren't following through" with the program.

[Street Worker 2] then mentioned getting one particular PRI a job at 2:30, when he got out of school right around that time. [Street Worker 2] claimed: "You're just setting him up to fail."

[The Program Coordinator] then brought up the fact that this PRI "had worked at the Y all summer" and "didn't do well at the time." [Street Worker 2] pointed out: "But he worked all summer." [The Program Coordinator] just dismissed that idea.

[Street Worker 2] wonder if he could get anything set up for this young man. He commented: "You make him feel like he can't get services because of where he lives." He again broached the idea of giving him so funds "so this guy can make it."

[The Program Coordinator] brought up how another Street Worker had said that these young men were "not following through on anything" and that he was "chasing them all over." So, in [The Program Coordinator]'s opinion, they did not deserve any stipend.

[Street Worker 2] replied caustically that other PRIs were "getting' stipends for less."

[The Program Coordinator] raised the volume and tenor of his usually deep and calmly forceful voice: "But you know they didn't follow through!"

[Street Worker 2] shot right back: "It's about giving them an incentive." He brought up how the young men he was talking about hadn't been doing anything out on the street: "The dudes ain't actin' up."

[The Program Coordinator] then brought up the fact that [Street Worker 2] had claimed that the two PRIs weren't even on his case file, seeming somewhat confused by this.

[Street Worker 2] asserted that he had already told him this and then returned to topic, telling [The Program Coordinator]: "You reward them. But it's not just about you." He then suggested that he would go through [Street Worker 1] and [The Street Worker Manager] to get the money.

[The Program Coordinator] replied: "That's fine. Do what you need to do. But I am not going to put my stamp on it."

What is clear in this exchange is that the Program Coordinator and Street Worker have very different views of the value of a stipend largely because of what they assume to be going on in the minds of the PRIs. For the Street Worker, the stipend represents encouragement. For the Program Coordinator, the stipend is potentially the reward for a hustle or scam. The PRI doesn't need encourage, but rather needs to prove himself in the eyes of the Program Coordinator.

This is not to say that the Street Workers or Program Coordinators did not recognize the validity of each other's interpretation. In fact, it was not unusual to hear Street Workers speak about a PRI's apparent willingness or readiness to make changes in his life. Similarly, the Program Coordinators often advocated for their PRIs to receive modest weekly stipends from StreetSafe while taking a GED class or going through some job training program. What is key is that the responsibilities for particular interpretations or types of information about the PRI are not distributed in the same way. The Street Workers are asked to motivate, prod, guide, and persuade the PRIs. The Program Coordinators, and the Workforce Development Manager for that matter, are basically faced with the challenge of evaluating the PRI's internal states and assessing their potential future behavior. Getting someone to do something and trying to figure out how someone might behave generally require focusing on different types of things. Whether a PRI decides to work with StreetSafe because of the mentoring influence of Street Worker, the promise of a job, or the pressure from a senior gang member looks the same, at least at that moment. Just how successful a PRI will be in committing the necessary time and energy to turning his or her life around requires a different set of theories about what it takes for people to make these kinds of personal conversions.

The Program Coordinators and Workforce Development Manager began to speak of the need for formal processes—such as requiring so many scheduled face-to-face meetings and filling out “Success Plans” together with the PRI and Street Worker—not just as a way to coordinate with the Street Workers and each other, but as a way to test a PRI's commitment to changing. There was ongoing concern for trying to figure out the PRI's “mindset.” Program Coordinators expressed their concern for trying to figure out if a PRI was coming to them still entrenched in the mindset of the street. In this mindset, the PRI, savvy from a lifetime of

encountering social workers and organizations looking to “help” them, attempts to “run game” on the Street Worker or Program Coordinator—that is, he attempts to hustle whatever money or opportunities from the organization without making a serious commitment. In a scenario often discussed among the Program Coordinators, a PRI might commit to a GED program (or something similar) in order to get enough money from stipend checks (usually about \$75 per week) to “re-up,” or buy large enough amount of drugs that could be broken down into smaller doses and sold for a profit. Whether or not this actually happened or not is beside the point. The key is that the Program Coordinators were very much attuned to looking for evidence or signs to distinguish feigned from genuine changes of heart. Putting up seemingly artificial barriers, such as regular required face-to-face meetings, was essentially one of the only ways those in Service Delivery had available to them to make this kind of subtle distinction. From the point of view of the Street Workers, who were trying to entice and sustain the PRIs’ interest in working with them and StreetSafe, such practical barriers were a problem, even for PRIs who might be genuine in their desire to leave behind the life of the streets. Even for the sincere PRI, faced with both the pressures and seductions of the street, getting a seemingly bureaucratic runaround could be potentially discouraging.

It is important to realize that these different understandings of how StreetSafe should work as an organization build upon different conceptualizations of the human mind. If changing the behavior of the PRIs is the key task for the organization as whole, then what works better: material incentives or a guided acculturation process? These differing conceptualizations of mind are certainly available within the broader cultural discourse, especially in the world of social services. Indeed, it was not unusual to hear Street Workers and Program Coordinators express both. Their positions, in effect, bias them to favoring the model of the human mind more closely

aligned with the practical demands of their position. Tensions and arguments that developed between Street Workers and Service Delivery often came about because ultimately they were looking at the PRIs from different perspectives—perspectives tied up in their role responsibilities, the practical demands of the work, and their available courses of action. These tensions were not just about what demands one group was putting on the other. They were also about the fact that the other side failed to see what the problem really was.

The Problem of Emotions

Given that the Street Worker and Service Delivery faced difficulties in coordinating both the practical demands of their work as well as their conceptual understandings of the problem, it is perhaps that no surprise that emotional tensions between the groups bubbled up, occasionally disrupting the work. There were, of course, many potential reasons for these kinds of emotional disruptions. They might range from momentary disagreements that become too heated to long-held personal clashes that bleed into the professional environment. From the point of view of coordination, however, the underlying causes of strongly emotional conflicts are moot. A negative emotional valence surrounding the interactions among an organization's members might impede or disrupt coordination. The concern from a sociological perspective is not necessarily that individuals might privately experience negative emotions about their work or their coworkers, but that the accepted "style of interaction" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) within the organization regularly allows for the public expression of such disrupting emotions.

To that end, the tension between Street Workers and Service Delivery became something of a disrupting force at times, especially in the early days of the organization. Privately, each side expressed a certain amount of judgment about the other group's efforts and value to the

organization. Some Street Workers, who were out on the streets, taking serious personal risks in attempting to connect with the gang members, questioned what value, if any, the Program Coordinators were bringing to their organization. In their eyes, especially in the organization's beginning, the Program Coordinators did nothing. The Program Coordinators too expressed skepticism about the effort of some of the Street Workers, who spent most of their time unsupervised. They had concern that some of the Street Workers were not far enough removed from the world of the PRIs and that they were not "professional" enough for the job. These perceptions from both contained some truth (as later incidents and personnel changes revealed), but they were not necessarily entirely fair or accurate. Still, the importance of these kinds of perception lie in their ability to color and influence how members would read and interpret the others' actions, requests of them, and so on.

But what is especially important from the point of view of coordination is how these kinds of negative evaluations—for whatever professional or personal reasons—were allowed to become part of the official interactions among the Street Workers and Program Coordinators and/or Workforce Development Manager. In StreetSafe's first years, meetings between the Street Workers and Program Coordinators were occasionally disrupted by the behavior—often of one or two individuals—that might be described as antagonistic, disruptive, or even petulant. As an outside observer, one often got the sense that there more going on in the interaction than whatever was being discussed.

The following scene, captured in my fieldnotes early in my observation period, captures the way these problematic emotional tonalities colored the interactions. The meeting took place in the small office space at a local youth center, where the Program Coordinator's office was.

There were four men at the meeting at this point (three other Street Workers arrived later)—the Program Coordinator, the Street Worker, the Street Worker Manager, and myself.:

Eventually, [The Street Worker] came into the office... Immediately, I sensed some tension in the room, driven primarily by [The Street Worker]. His posture seemed to indicate a laidback demeanor, as he slouched in his seat and splayed his legs. However, this posture belied an almost resentful tone that could be detected from the get-go. He appeared to hide his glance behind semi-transparent sunglasses that he kept on during the entire meeting. Even as I introduced myself, he interrupted me forcefully as I tried to explain my role on the evaluation team. Seemingly unconcerned with putting me at ease, he demanded in an assertive manner that I start with the most basic information as he had no idea what I was talking about, to which I obliged. After that, the meeting got underway...

[The Program Coordinator] then looked through his Excel spreadsheet and announced the name of one of the [Street Worker's] charges. [The Street Worker] acknowledged him. [The Program Coordinator] continued, briefly going over the last he had heard of the young man. [This particular PRI] had apparently disappeared after being brought into "the pipeline." He was then incarcerated after that, went away, and recently came back. He had expressed some interest in applying to the Culinary House—some kind of culinary vocational training program. [The Program Coordinator] commented: "That was the only one from [one of the neighborhood gangs], in [The Street Worker]'s care. The only one at 'Boston by Night.'"

[The Street Worker] immediately shot back: "There were four of them."

[The Program Coordinator] shrugged and asked if he had any updates on those four young men for him then.

[The Street Worker] seemed to take exception to [The Program Coordinator]'s comment (and perhaps his tone), and sat up and asked excitedly: "What do you mean?"

[The Street Worker Manager] immediately jumped in, rewording [The Program Coordinator]'s question slightly, but basically asking [The Street Worker] the same thing—namely, to report back on the PRIs he was supposedly building a relationship with. [The Street Worker] immediately began to list the names of the young men he had brought to the Boston by Night event. He began with [Dwayne], explaining that he was trying to get a job by himself. [The Street Worker Manager] asked, "You mean on his own?" [The Street Worker] said yes. He then mentioned [Robert] and his ambition to get involved in a culinary training program. He then said another couple of names that I did not catch. There was some back and forth between [The Street Worker] on the one side and [The Program Coordinator] and [The Street Worker Manager] on the other. At a couple of different points in the conversation, [The Street Worker] described these young men as interested in "trying their hand" at some such program or another.

Eventually, [The Program Coordinator] interrupted [The Street Worker] and told him: "I don't know what you mean by 'try their hand.' Does that mean they are action ready?"

[The Street Worker] rolled his eyes and basically told him that these young men had "expressed that they wanted to take a shot." But, [The Street Worker] told [The Program Coordinator]: "You haven't followed up."

[The Program Coordinator]'s eyes widened and he looked up and smiled, and then became visibly excited in his speech. The accusation obviously perturbed him. He looked at [The Street Worker] and said: "Just set me up with a date and time."

[The Street Worker], sitting cross-armed, rolled his eyes, pursed his lips and shook his head while looking at the ceiling. There was obvious tension between the two men, who were sitting right next to each other on the same side of the table, and it was beginning to bubble over.

[The Program Coordinator] declared with a sense of frustration, looking to [The Street Worker Manager]: “It’s not me.” He pointed out that he was asking of [The Street Worker] the same thing he did of every Street Worker during the community unit meeting—that is, to report back on the PRIs who might be service ready. [The Street Worker] then pointed out that he had introduced [The Program Coordinator] to these young men at the Boston by Night event. [The Program Coordinator] explained how he “did not want to overstep” his bounds as a Program Coordinator by dealing with the PRIs directly himself at this point. He tried to argue to [The Street Worker] that it was on him to follow up with these young men to officially bring them to [The Program Coordinator] for services. This was more in line with what I have come to understand as the official process, but [The Street Worker] seemed to resist this interpretation as [The Program Coordinator] explained his position. [The Program Coordinator] eventually emphasized that he just didn’t want to overstep his bounds. To move the conversation forward, he exclaimed: “Okay, what time?”

[The Street Worker] told him: “I’ll go find them and set up a meeting in the next seven days.” [The Street Worker Manager] jumped in, trying to confirm: “So by next Wednesday?” [The Street Worker] shrugged and nodded.

What is revealing about this scene is the way in which the tense negative emotions define the style of interaction, which feeds into the Program Coordinator’s and Street Worker’s inability to complete the seemingly basic task of scheduling a meeting with one the Street Worker’s PRIs. Whatever the reason for the apparent resentment and mistrust between the two men, this is still an official meeting in which they are supposed to attempt to literally coordinate with each other about what to do with the PRIs under their shared charge. The posturing, the comments, and the way these two men speak to each other all occur despite the Street Worker Manager’s attempts to ameliorate the obvious tensions between the two men. While such an interaction was not necessarily an everyday occurrence, it certainly occurred with enough regularity to be recognized by the members of StreetSafe themselves. Eventually, they termed these kinds of problems as “personality” problems, which included both personal dispositions as well as personal conflicts someone might have with another member of the organization.

Conflicts such as this one cannot be accounted for by reference to differences in interpretation of the work or practical problems that might be interfering with these two men’s ability to work together. There is a rawness to the emotional intensity of such situations. As such situations unfold, it often becomes clear that reasoning will not necessarily resolve the issue

between the parties. One often senses that no matter what one person says, the other person will say the opposite. Gestures and expressions thinly veil mutual contempt, and conflict festers. Even a verbal agreement about some future meeting belies the negative emotional valence between the two men. To fail to recognize the role emotions can play in coordination *on their own* is to miss the point that it is not just what is said, but how it is said. In the case of StreetSafe's first years, for whatever reason, the emotional dissonance among some of the staff members certainly played some role in disrupting the effective coordination of Street Workers and Service Delivery.

Theoretical Considerations: Sensemaking and Organizing

StreetSafe's early struggles reveal the gap between the organization on paper and the organization in practice. The plan for an organization that combines Street Work and Service Delivery may seem straightforward enough in the abstract, but the challenges of making that organization work proved daunting. First, it was clear that the plan made some questionable assumptions about both the nature of the problem (i.e. that continued participation in gang life was largely a structural problem) and the solution (i.e. provide access to resources). Doing the work proved more challenging on a variety of dimensions, but it was clear that the formal procedural scaffolding of organization would not be adequate for the task at hand. Street Workers and Program Coordinators alike needed to rely heavily on their personal connections, influence, and persuasiveness to make the process work—something that needed to be figured out along the way, and something that some struggled with. Second, it was not clear at all just how the two key components of the organization would work together, especially in the light of the practical demands of the organization. Street Workers and Service Delivery had very

different perspectives on the problem at hand, and so they had very different expectations of the organization's rules and processes, as well as each other. Finally, there was a lack of emotional consonance within the organization. This line of work is often deeply emotional. The stakes are often very high for the young men (and women) being helped, and the people trying to help them are often very passionate about it. Personal and professional conflicts were bleeding into the official interactions of the staff and disrupting the ability to get things done.

This is not to say that StreetSafe was necessarily failing. Despite the various challenges in getting all of the pieces to work together, StreetSafe's staff members still managed to connect with a significant number of PRIs in the five targeted neighborhoods, and even help a good number of them connect to services and jobs. But getting the organization to work in any single case is not the same thing as having a working organization. The extraordinary efforts of individuals to reach a PRI and help him turn his life around is not the same thing as having a system in place that can reach and help a large number of individuals consistently and effectively. The former often involves only temporary coordination of individuals and really no clear or consistent definition of the problem,³⁹ while the latter involves ongoing coordination and a formal definition of the problem. The question is: can an emerging organization like StreetSafe overcome the barriers it faces in effectively coordinating its members in a consistent and ongoing manner? What ultimately gives an organization its form?

Roughly speaking, this problem tends to be thought of in two different ways. The first is what we might call the *top-down* approach. This reflects a pretty standard approach among actual organizational managers and practitioners. The top-down approach basically attempts to

³⁹ What I mean by this is that in an situation where people are informally enlisting the cooperation of others in a non-regular fashion, then there might be a variety of reasons why the other person might be cooperating at that moment. It could be done as a favor. It could be a convincing argument about the exceptional nature of the problem at hand. It could be done as a matter of personal or professional courtesy. The key is that the lack of regularity allows such temporary coordination to resist formal definition and thus rules.

formalize procedures, relationships, and obligations through the exercise of organizational authority. The top-down approach favors rule-following over discretion. It relies on standardization of knowledge and interpretation. In defining the role more completely, it minimizes the influence of the person, but in doing so is able to (in theory) more effectively organize that set of roles. The second approach to the problem is the *bottom-up* approach. This bottom-up approach comes largely in response to the misperceptions of the top-down approach of how organizations actually work in practice. Formal rules, standards, and procedures often fail to cover the epistemological richness that individuals encounter in the demands of practice, so there is much more room flexibility, creativity, and human agency than is typically understood in top-down approach (see Orr 1996; Star and Greisner 1989; Star and Lampland 2009; Taylor and Van Every 2001; Huising and Silbey 2011). The bottom-up approach emphasizes the way practices constitute formal rules, standards, and procedures. Rules need to be interpreted (Zimmerman 1970) and made sense of through mutually recognizable set of practices (Wegner 1998). The bottom-up approach recognizes the limits of organizational authority by emphasizing the role of actual practitioner's interpretive capacities in bringing the organization to fruition.

The exemplar of this bottom-up approach is the work of Karl Weick, particularly his notion of sensemaking and its relationship to the problem of organizing. I think it is useful to, first, explore Weick's theoretical approach in some depth because, in many ways, it maps closely to what is going on at StreetSafe. Ultimately, however, I will argue Weick's framework falls short in explaining the case of StreetSafe for reasons connected to this tension between the top-down and bottom-up approaches. At issue is a conflation between the problems of epistemology and problem of collective action that ignores the distinct social facticity of coordination itself. I will argue that the case of StreetSafe demonstrates that while issues of interpretation and practice

are paramount, a strictly bottom-up approach to the problem of organizing fails to fully explain just how StreetSafe is able to overcome its barriers to coordination in order to become a more effective organization—that is, how it is able to *organize*. Central is how we think about the formal features of an organization and how they relate to the on-the-ground interpretation and practices. Much of the work with a bottom-up perspective tends to take for granted the formal features of an organization—the rules, procedures, standards, and so on—without necessarily accounting for what they mean for interpretive work being done by organizational actors. What I want to suggest is a more dialectical way of thinking about the relationship between the formal features of the organization and the problems of interpretation and practice in which the formal features of the organization play a key role in framing coordination among organizational actors.

The Process of Sensemaking

Weick's seminal work on the process of organizational sensemaking ([1969] 1979) represents a truly radical break from traditional social scientific understandings of human action and organizations. Weick's model begins with action, or more precisely, "enaction." The default state for human beings in his model is to be engaged in some kind of action. It is purposeful, without being precisely goal driven.⁴⁰ Enaction, in particular, Weick defines as "isolating some portion of the flow of experience for closer attention" ([1969] 1979: p. 149). Organizations begin by enacting their environment. An organization's members begin to do things, perhaps with only some vague theories and assumptions about the problem or issue at hand. This includes "operating without goals, misplacing personnel, operating a technology no one understands"

⁴⁰ One clearly hears the echoes of a Pragmatist theory of purposive, non-teleological model of action in Weick's work. Although he does not explicitly attribute this model to the early Pragmatists, he does make reference to James, Dewey, and Mead.

(Weick [1969] 1979: p. 185). In taking these particular courses of action, they are acting on some vaguely held interpretation of the environment, and effectively ignoring other potential courses of action/interpretations. As Lant (2002) points out, Weick is arguing not just that organizations merely have different interpretations of an environment, but that they are literally enacting different environments based on their interpretations.

Such enaction draws a response from environment, “produc[ing] variable raw materials for selection to process “ (Weick [1969] 1979: p. 185). This “selection” process is basically figuring out what to make of these results. People act in the world, results bubble up, and there is need to make sense of what is going on collectively. In some ways, this model flips the widespread model of beliefs-driving-action on its head. Beliefs about the world are developed after already acting in the world. People, in effect, figure out what it is that they have been up to, and select those courses of action that are most defensible to interested publics, most consistent with their collective identity, most consistent with broader cultural beliefs, and so on. In the next step, “retention,” people decide to continue with some courses of action and not others. These retained beliefs/courses of action in turn inform future actions, or enaction, so that the cycle may begin all over again.

This enaction-selection-retention cycle makes up the heart of the ongoing “sensemaking” process in organizations. Weick explains: “The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs...Sensemaking emphasizes that people try to make things rationally accountable to themselves and others” (2001: p. 106). Organizations, as sites of highly visible ongoing courses of action, must work hard to develop understandable and legitimate justifications of their actions—for themselves, as well as any other interested audience. But what is especially

important about Weick's notion of sensemaking is the idea that organizational actors develop a shared sense or understanding of the collective situation. Following Weick, Taylor and Van Every explain that "sensemaking is that way station on the road to consensually constructed, coordinated system of action" (2001: p. 275).

Although at points in his lengthy oeuvre Weick has backed off the strong statement that shared meaning is necessary for coordination (see Weick and Roberts [1993] 2001; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld [2005] 2009), the overall emphasis in Weick's work is that sensemaking, as the development of a shared sense of the problem, is a fundamental feature of organizing, which he argues is the process of developing a "consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors" ([1969] 1979: p. 3). In Weick's point of view, the world is a messy, complex place. In order to organize—that is, in order to coordinate our actions in a regular, sustainable fashion—we need to reduce that ambiguity by explicitly figuring out what it is we are doing together. Methodologically, this means a strong emphasis on communication within organizations: "Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence" (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld [2005] 2009: p. 131). Over time, through such ongoing communication, people working within an organization develop a "shared cognitive map" for understanding their work (Langfield-Smith 1992). In theory, having this shared understanding allows them to coordinate their actions more effectively—for better or worse.⁴¹

Clearly, this model of sensemaking—as a consensual, emergent process—favors a kind of bottom-up understanding of how an organization works. This is not to say that authority is absent from this model—after all, justification to internal and external audiences or authorities is

⁴¹ People could share a mistaken understanding of the situation, which can be potentially dangerous as the consequences of the actions of a large organization can be much more consequential than that of an individual. This is one of the central themes of the literature on organizational disasters. See Perrow (1999), in particular, Chapter 6 on marine accidents.

part of sensemaking. What is key is that organizational actors play a central role in constructing the justifiable and legitimate understanding of the situation in the context of a messy, ambiguous world.

But does Weick have it exactly right? In thinking through how his model applies to the case of emerging organization like StreetSafe, there is an immediate recognition of both the kind of world Weick's model assumes (messy, complex, and ambiguous) and the kind of philosophical anthropology it depends on (people as always, already acting, engaging in their world). Enaction is very much an apt term for explaining what StreetSafe was doing in those first years. There were some vague notions about what the organization's goals were, but the requirements for getting from point A to point B in a relatively effective and consistent manner were not very well understood. Both the Street Work and Service Delivery side of the organization were probing their respective task environments, trying to figure out which strategies and tactics would yield consistent results. For sure, there were missteps—a Street Worker inadvertently violating the norms of the street and losing the trust of his PRIs, or Service Delivery contracting with a program that would fail to live up to its promise. But StreetSafe's members were out there taking action, producing some of the “raw material” out of which they would need to make some sense.

In many ways, the various struggles—practical, conceptual, and emotional—would seem to reflect a lack of shared understanding of the work, the problem, the solution, and each other. StreetSafe would appear to be an organization in need of sensemaking. What I want to suggest is that the strong version of Weick's concept of sensemaking—as the consensual development of a shared understanding—conflates the problems of epistemology and the problem of collective action. A shared understanding is not necessary for collective action to take place. In the next

section, I will briefly explore research that has challenged the strong version of Weick's notion of sensemaking and use it to suggest an alternative model for understanding how coordination works in formal organizations. From there, I will then examine just how StreetSafe responded to the various barriers it faced in coordinating its members. What will become clear is that sensemaking as developing a shared understanding fails to account for just how StreetSafe began to work.

What Kind of Sense Needs to Be Made?

While Weick's work has been extremely influential in the interpretive view of the problems of organizational knowledge and cognition, there are a number of people who have called into question the need for a shared understanding among organizational actors (Lant 2002). Taken together, this research asks the question: what kind of "sense" must be shared in order for coordination to occur? The answer would seem to suggest moving away from the deep consensus model of collective action.

For example, Donnellon, Gray, and Bourgon (1986) find that organizational actions are often understood in multiple ways. The fact that any particular action might be understood in multiple ways allows the action to be defensible to multiple audiences. Rather than impeding organizational action, such polysemy may indeed be preferable. This is consistent with research on ambiguity in organizational communication. It behooves organizations of any size and complexity, facing the demands of multiple internal and external audiences, to use vague, ambiguous language about goals, actions, and so on (Eisenberg 2006; Cohen and March 1986). At a certain level, this kind of statement seems almost obvious. Of course organizational actions are understood in different ways, as organizations are typically made up of various specialists,

with different points of view of some problem and with different responsibilities toward different audiences. But if understandings are not shared, then how does coordination happen?

Fiol (1994) shows that it is not necessarily the shared understanding of the content that matters, but rather the shared framing of the problem that matters. She points out that for innovative organizations, such as the ones she studied, the tension between consensus and diversity is a practical problem. Managers might encourage conflicting points of view in order to drive innovation, but they must also help people develop a shared framing of the overall problem.

Weick certainly makes concessions to the fact that shared understanding is not always necessary for coordination to take place. Weick and Roberts show how an aircraft career works quite well without the individual necessarily sharing the same understanding of the situation at hand ([1993]2001). What matters more is the amount of “heedful interrelating” that goes on in the immediate interactions of the flight deck crew—each individual knows how to react to his or her immediate colleagues, and frankly, places a tremendous amount of trust in them. In his most recent review of the problem of sensemaking, Weick concedes considerable ground to these critics:

When information is distributed among numerous parties, each with a different impression of what is happening, the cost of reconciling these disparate views is high, so discrepancies and ambiguities in outlook persist. Thus, multiple theories develop about what is happening and what needs to be done, people learn to work interdependently despite couplings loosened by the pursuit of diverse theories, and inductions may be more clearly associated with effectiveness when they provide equivalent rather than shared meanings. (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld [2005] 2009: p. 145)

So what then are equivalent meanings? What Weick means by this term is that in a situation where people with different understandings must work together, they view—or are at least compelled to view—the different meanings each other holds as being roughly equivalent. There

is, in effect, no explicit superordination of one meaning over the other. The next question then becomes: how do people come to understand their different meanings as equivalent? How and why do people put aside differences? In the next section, I hope to develop an alternative framework for thinking about the problem of coordination that reimagines rather than abandons the interpretive problems therein.

Rethinking Coordination

A deep consensus view of sensemaking assumes that shared understanding/meaning is necessary for collective action to take place. One of the biggest flaws of this strong version of sensemaking is that it assumes that the individual level problems of epistemology inherent to work—that is, how individuals go about thinking about the problems that they face, about getting things done, etc—are necessarily tied up with that individual's experience of coordinating with others. This seems to put us in an impossible position when thinking about actual organizations, as actual organizations generally require and indeed thrive on diverse understandings, specialized forms of knowledge, and so on. But, if we begin with a different set of assumptions, we can reframe the problem of coordination in a way that is more consistent with actual organizations, especially organizations facing messy, complex problems.

First, I want to abandon the deep consensus view of intersubjectivity altogether. I don't just want to say that a shared understanding is not necessary for collective action, but that no two (or more) individual minds ever truly match up, one-to-one, in their understanding of a given situation. And yet, coordinated and collective actions occur all the time. How then is it that people manage to work together without being of the same mind? The heart of the matter lies in what we imagine coordination to be. If we begin with individual, atomistic minds, then

coordination in the face of diversity appears to be a problem. However, if instead we take a cue from Vygotsky (1978) and Mead (1968) and think of the mind itself as deriving from our experience as social beings, then we might think of even a diverse set of individual minds as biased to the demands of social coordination (Mercier and Sperber 2011). Rather than working from a set of assumptions that makes coordination a near impossible collective task, we lower the bar. This does not abandon the problem of interpretation, but reframes it.

Building off this idea, I want to suggest that sociology already has some language for thinking about the problem of coordination in this way. Goffman's notion of "surface agreement" or "veneer of consensus" is especially relevant here (Goffman 1959). Individuals do not bring all of their epistemological and emotional baggage to every interaction with other people. Generally, we learn to take the cues from the situation as to what topics, expressions, language, mannerisms, and pieces of information are relevant to the interaction—and leave most of our individual concerns, emotions, and thoughts aside. Together, with the other individuals involved in the interaction, we establish a thin, surface agreement about what the interaction is about. This veneer of consensus can certainly be breached by the underlying concerns, information, emotions, evaluations, etc, that are supposed to be put aside by the individuals involved, and without active efforts to repair, such breaches can undermine the interaction (Winship 2004). Key with the notion of surface agreement is that it implies a much lower interpretive threshold for sustaining an interaction. With only a vague notion of what this interaction is about, the interaction can occur successfully.

We find very similar ideas in ethnomethodology as well as the inferential model of communication proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995). One of Garfinkel's key insights came from the observation of just how little people needed to say to each other in order to understand

one another (1967). We rely heavily on one another to create and sustain a recognizable order to the situation. Such interactions rely heavily on our inferential capacities. In fact, Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue that human communication should be thought of as primarily inferential in its nature. We do not, as the traditional code model of communication supposes, merely encode, transmit, receive, and decode information from one person to the next. Instead, communication is largely “ostensive” in that it points out those pieces of one’s “shared cognitive environment” that are “mutually relevant.” Rather than waste time and energy being overly precise, we rely on others to “get” what it is we are talking about. Again, such interactional and communicative orders can and do breakdown. But what they offer is a way to understand how successful interactions and communications have much lower semantic requirements than we often theoretically assume.

If we think of these interactional and communicative situations from the point of view of the individual, the primary concern is not necessarily establishing consensus with the other people involved, but rather establishing relevance. We need to figure out what to bring up, what not to bring up, what is expected of us, what to expect of others, and so on. We experience the obligations, requirements, and norms of these interactions as external to ourselves—the very essence of social facticity. A failure in coordination results not necessarily from a lack of shared understanding about the problem that the group faces collectively, but rather a lack of shared understanding about the demands of the interaction itself. Without a clear sense of the boundaries and constraints of the situation, individuals may bring up thoughts, emotions, experiences, interpretations, etc, that they may individually think are relevant, but others might not. Private interpretations, emotional baggage, and other potentially disruptive individual experiences have a way of bleeding into such disordered interactional settings. The issue of

coordination would appear to hinge not on interpretation as consensus-building, but rather on interpretation as the constraint of mutual relevance.

If we do accept the idea that our minds are generally biased to meet the demands of coordination, then perhaps it also calls for a more expansive sense in which people can coordinate their actions. To that end, I suggest we move beyond the heavy reliance on conceptual knowledge, and make room for both practice and emotion. We coordinate with one another, not just at the conceptual level, but also in terms of our practical activity and our embodied emotions. What we do, as well as our ongoing embodied emotive sense of the world around us, are subject to the same kinds of constraints of mutual relevance in interactional settings. Moreover, we can learn to become members of “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998), or “interaction ritual chains” may engage our “emotional energy” (Collins 2004)—that is, we are socially engaged at the practical and emotional levels as well. Coordination doesn’t just demand that we put aside (much of) our private experiences, thoughts, and emotions; it also enjoins us to engage with the conceptual, practical, and emotional power offered through collective action. As individuals we may recognize our limited capacity for action, and while we may experience the demands of coordination as social facts—that is, outside of ourselves—we also realize that by submitting to such demands we participate in actions greater than our own.

So what does any of this have to do with organizations? Returning to the case of StreetSafe, it is clear that in many ways, consistent, effective coordination was not happening—in terms of practices, concepts, or even emotions. In many ways, people were overstepping the bounds of their roles, they were talking past each other, and sometimes they just weren’t getting along. In important ways, there wasn’t a clear sense of what the organization was up to among its members. Indeed one could easily argue that one of the things StreetSafe needed to do was

engage in the kind of bottom-up sensemaking processes that Weick describes. In fact, this was tried to some degree—with very mixed results. StreetSafe’s members began to better coordinate, but it was not strictly due efforts from the bottom-up. StreetSafe’s leadership began to make efforts on multiple fronts to increase the strength of the formal features of the organization.

If we think of coordination as experienced as the constraint of mutual relevance, then we can easily imagine how authority is realized in formal settings. Authority sets the conditions of mutual relevance in formal relationships. It is important to remember that we experience even informal interactions and relationships we as social facts that make demands of us to act and think in particular ways. In an important sense, the demands organizational authorities might make on formal relationships and interactions are basically experienced in the same way. Typically, we view constraints negatively. But I would like to suggest that in the case of an emerging organization like StreetSafe, where consistent coordination was an ongoing, the greater formal definition of relations among Street Workers and Service Delivery to each other and to their work became a collective resource that made more effective and consistent coordination possible. Standards, processes, and organizational concepts did not necessarily narrow or eliminate the diversity and flexibility needed to do the job at the individual epistemological level. Instead, they became key signposts or reference points by which individuals could understand not only the demands of their work, but their obligations to each other. In the case of StreetSafe, leadership played a key role not necessarily by imposing a particular understanding of the work, but by bracketing and structuring the relationships of the organization’s members. In what follows, I will examine three different areas where formal features played some role in facilitating more consistent and effective coordination.

StreetSafe Working?

It is not easy to identify one clear moment or situation that helped StreetSafe turn around from the struggles of the first two years. In some ways, things got worse before they got better. During the second official year of the program, there was significant turnover in personnel at all levels—Street Workers, Program Coordinators, and even management. Through a combination of resignations, firings, promotions, new hires, and shuffling of remaining personnel, StreetSafe’s community unit structure—which typically consisted of a Program Coordinator and several Street Workers—went through sixteen distinct permutations during that fiscal year. In many ways, these numerous changes accentuated the need for greater formalization of the work. Roles and obligations needed to be understood in generalized, depersonalized ways so that work could continue without regard to what person was in what position. However, this also meant that the work itself—that is, how to go about bringing someone from active involvement gang to services, employment, and beyond—needed to be understood in a relatively standardized, general way as well.

It was also during this time that The Boston Foundation brought in a new Executive Director for the StreetSafe Boston program. Up until this point, StreetSafe had functioned without a true Executive in place, receiving mostly indirect, and somewhat inconsistent, direction from individuals within The Boston Foundation. The Executive Director certainly played a key role making many of the necessary changes for the organization, but what was perhaps just as important was the mere fact that there now was an Executive Director position. StreetSafe would have relatively clear and consistent direction from on top, not only to give orders, but to back up the efforts and interpretations of people on the ground. Giving credit

where credit is due, the Executive Director certainly lead on some organizational changes, but his presence also allowed for others in the organization to make the necessary changes as well.

In many real, practical ways, the problems of epistemology—that is, how people in an organization think about the problem, construct evidence of success or failure, etc.—seems deeply related to the problem of coordination—that is, how you get people to work together. In a strict sensemaking model, working out the problems of epistemology facilitates coordination. What happened at StreetSafe suggests that while these problems are interrelated in important ways, coordination is distinct from the problems of epistemology. Pressures from organizational authority to formalize relationships, processes, and even thinking did not necessarily resolve the epistemological problems, but instead facilitated more consistent and effective coordination among organizational members. While such moves did constrain some of the epistemological framing of the problem, there was still a significant amount of diversity in the understanding of the problem in the organization. The imposed formal features of the organization helped crystallize the kind of surface agreements necessary for organizational members to coordinate more effectively. How StreetSafe was able to become more effective organization—that is, how it *organized*—was a combination of top-down and bottom-up efforts. What happened was not sensemaking in the typical sense, but a combination of authoritative definitions and grounded elaborations of the work and the demands of coordination.

In this section, I will examine three interrelated organizational responses to the barriers of coordination previously discussed. I will begin first with the problem of emotions. The Executive Director made several crucial and controversial personnel moves that helped shift the emotional tone of the interactions in the organization. Next I will explore the problems of practice. Key here was both the introduction of standardized measures as well as formalized procedures.

Finally, I will examine the conceptual problems, or problems of understanding. I will focus on the explicit attempts to develop a common language and theory for the organization's work. It is important to keep in mind that many of these developments occurred around the same time, and that they are related in many ways. The goal of this section is not to rank order the relative importance of the different types of coordination—emotional, practical, or conceptual—involved, but to recognize that for StreetSafe, there were explicit attempts to deal with the problems of coordination in these areas.

Setting the Tone

The new Executive Director arrived at the beginning of 2011, but purposefully took several months to get to know the organization before making any significant changes. But he also clearly signaled to the Community Unit teams during their Community Unit meetings that while he was “not making any assumptions” about their efforts early on, he wanted to get to know “what we do and how we do it.” It was clear within several months time that he was paying close attention not only to who was apparently effective, but also how people were working with others in the organization. In particular, the Executive Director focused on the problem of letting personal conflicts or “personality” disrupt working effectively with others in the organization.

At several points, the Executive Director framed the stakes of the StreetSafe's work in stark terms: young men's lives were at stake. He made it clear that to let organizational protocol or petty personal squabbles get in the way of helping a young man leave the life of the street was wrong. Whether or not such warnings were enough to address the problem is a moot point, as the Executive Director made several drastic personnel changes, particularly on the Street Work side of the organization. The Street Worker Manager, the Street Work Field Coordinator, and several

Street Workers were fired. While some of these decisions may have been in part about a lack of productivity, much of the decision seemed to center on the attitude of those fired. Some were certainly known for being difficult and disruptive. It was the firing of one individual, who had something of a reputation of being a good and effective Street Worker that drove the point home. The perception was that this individual's "leadership style" was divisive—he favored friends and proved difficult to work with for those outside the circle, keeping important information from them. Regardless of whether the assessments of these individuals is one-hundred-percent accurate or fair matters less than the fact that these personnel decisions—while certainly controversial for some—sent a clear signal about what kind of interactional tone would be expected among the organization's members.

Even though in the immediate aftermath these decisions were not exactly well received, and the new Street Worker Manager made some moves and missteps that many questioned, the tone of the organization did seem to change. Conflict and disagreement among the organization's members did not disappear, but the days of persistent disruptive public conflicts or attitudes seem to have subsided for now. One might argue that StreetSafe had merely gotten rid of the problematic employees. While there is certainly some truth to that, I would suggest that in doing so that they also established expectations about how people are supposed to deal with disagreements and conflict. Veteran Street Workers, who may have felt comfortable being less than cooperative with Program Coordinators before, might hesitate to do so now. Moreover, StreetSafe did bring in new personnel on both the Street Work and Service Delivery sides of the organization, and while they may experience the conflicting demands of their different positions, I have yet to hear of any serious personal disputes getting in the way of their work.

Admittedly, the evidence for a change in tone is thin. It is difficult to capture, especially when one does not necessarily go into a situation expecting to look for it. While I do not want to suggest that the resulting tone of the interactions among StreetSafe's employees was perfect or that it necessarily precludes the possibility of personal conflict disrupting the work, I believe that in small, but important ways, it improved enough so that whatever negative public emotions were there before were no longer a persistent barrier to effective coordination.

Measures and Formal Procedures: Imperfect Tools for a Difficult Job

The ambiguity and uncertainty inherent to the kind of social service work that StreetSafe does presents two fundamental problems for practitioners. The first is the problem of evidence. Evidence of success or failure of any particular action is often difficult to discern clearly. For example, in one case, a Program Coordinator was convinced that he made a deep and effective personal connection with a PRI, who was a high ranking gang member recently released from federal prison. For all intents and purposes, the young man gave him every reason to think that he was turning his life around, completing a GED class, passing the exam, and moving on to a job training program where he was doing well. Then one Monday, the Program Coordinator came in to work only to find out that there was an arrest warrant out for this young man for the attempted murder of his girlfriend. The time, resources, and energy poured into improving this young man's life appeared to go to waste. Does this mean that the Program Coordinator made a mistake in investing time, energy, and resources on this young man? When working with a "proven risk" population, how does one discern a natural rate of attrition from a failed strategy? What are meaningful outcomes, short-term or long-term, when the problems are complex and

messy? How do you know that you are doing a good job when effort and results are only loosely coupled?

The members of StreetSafe, under the watchful gaze of The Boston Foundation and the evaluation team, were very much aware that the organization needed to produce results—in particular, reductions in the number of gang-related shootings and youth homicides in their Focus Areas. Still, just what was the most effective way of reducing those figures was still somewhat opaque to the organization. Right before the arrival of the new Executive Director, StreetSafe’s “Impact Associate”—whose job it was to design, implement, and maintain an information-tracking system for the entire organization—began holding “Impact Update” meetings every two months to report to each Community Unit, in the presence of StreetSafe’s leadership, the various counts and measures associated with the work of the Street Workers and Service Delivery, as well as relevant crime data for their areas. The Executive Director embraced these meetings, explicitly embracing them as way to “begin a discussion” about practices at StreetSafe.

At first, there was some initial trepidation, especially among the Street Workers, about having their performance measured in any way. To add to that concern, the ultimate outcomes—shootings and homicides—did not look good, and there was some error in various performance measures and counts, such as the number of PRIs engaged, the number of hours spent with the PRIs, and the number of interventions, because people had been inconsistent in filling out their required work logs. StreetSafe’s leadership tried to allay people’s concerns, treating the various counts and measures as basic tool for inquiry. The goal would be to try to figure out what was going on, and perhaps what best practices might be out there already.

For the Executive Director, the numbers in themselves were not necessarily meaningful because they weren't necessarily sure what constituted good, effective practices just yet. For example, the issue of how many numbers a Street Worker was spending with which PRIs in his or her assigned gang varied tremendously from one group to the next. Sometimes a Street Worker's time was relatively evenly distributed among the PRIs in the gang, and sometimes it was focused on a small number of individuals. These differences might reflect the very different group dynamics of those gangs:

[The Impact Associate] then moved onto the next slide, which broke down the hours spent with each PRI (by ID number) over an 8-week period. [The Executive Director jumped in: "I like this. It shows how we are working, who we're working with, and maybe who we should take off the list. This is stuff I'm gonna be looking at. At the end of the day, the most important thing is if we know our kids."

[The Street Worker Manager] then spoke to [Street Worker 1] and [Street Worker 2], telling them: "Make sure you talk with [the Lead Street Worker] about this." He pointed to one of the PRI numbers, [XX02], who had occupied 49.1 hours of [Street Worker 1]'s time—disproportionately much larger than any other PRI. [The Street Worker Manager] said with a smile: "I know who that is."

[Street Worker 1] then claimed that there was "no one on my list in general" hanging out in the [the neighborhood] that would be easy for her to find...

Pointing to the slide, [Street Worker 1] mentioned that several of the PRIs in her group "want nothing to do with StreetSafe." She explained that she had had a conversation with [the Lead Street Worker] about this problem. She said that she had already gone through [another Lead Street Worker] to connect to "the willing," but reaching out to these others was a problem. She explained: "I'm not going to take them off the list because I can't get to them. I know they are key players."

[The Executive Director] told [Street Worker 1]: "If it's a key player, then keep them on. There's a story behind the numbers. We don't want to get rid of some kids to improve our numbers."

[The Impact Associate] then encouraged [Street Worker 1] to "keep track" of any attempts, even failed attempts, so when they did "change" their minds and work with her, they will have captured that story.

The measure, even if imperfect, thus becomes a means for talking about the Street Worker's efforts and perhaps even encourages the Street Workers to be more deliberate and explicit in their contact strategies.

Going over such measures had the additional benefit of getting the Street Workers and Service Delivery members become more conscientious about recording their efforts. The Executive Director explained to StreetSafe's members: "Initially, we're making no assumptions.

But down the line, you will be held accountable.” Without consistent record of their efforts, StreetSafe’s work risked becoming unintelligible not only to its managers, but outsiders as well.

This was occasionally made explicit:

[The Street Worker] then added that there is often “so much going on” that he might not document something or he might lose his notes on an interaction.

[The Executive Director] commented that it was a challenge when you see something right in front of you, like they had. He said: “When you write something down and think no one is looking, eventually you’ll think, ‘Why do it? Now you see it.’”

[The Executive Director] emphasized the importance of trying to do a better job of capturing the kind of information [the Street Worker] was talking about. He told the group: “I’m not gonna lie. There are people who give us money and they want to see what we’re doing with their money.” Doing a better job of capturing the work they were doing was an important step in justifying the work they were doing.

One of the problems StreetSafe was facing was that its member were taking too much of a personal view of the work. To do the job well meant building trust, relying on personal reputation and charm, and often trusting in one’s own intuition about the PRIs. In this view, knowledge about one’s efforts, the PRIs, and so on, is largely a private matter. The measures and counts, however ill-fitting for the work, still had the benefit of getting StreetSafe’s members to think about their practices as falling, at least in part, under the purview of public knowledge.

The flipside of this move from private to public knowledge was that it made StreetSafe’s members more concerned about “getting credit” for their efforts. When the Impact Associate introduced the nebulous measure of *Interventions* for the Street Workers—that is, a time when the Street Worker directly intervened with the PRIs and prevented a violent incident from occurring—many of the Street Workers began counting a wider and wider array of conversations that they had with PRIs that may or may not have prevented the PRI from “doing something stupid.” Similarly, the Program Coordinators struggled with making sure that their various efforts to help the PRIs outside of categorized services counter. This included such things as

helping a PRI get his driver's license, assisting a PRI with the paperwork from the Department of Revenue (for child support issues), getting the PRI signed up at Career Center, and so on.

Much of the sociological literature on measures, quantification, and standards focuses on the epistemological narrowing resulting from analyzing knowledge in such ways (see Espeland and Stevens 1998; Star and Lampland 2009). However, I believe that such a view overlooks the pragmatic role such (mis?)measures might play for a group in the construction of mutually recognizable object. The members of StreetSafe explicitly recognized that they were working with imperfect measures, and they explicitly acknowledged the legitimating function such measures played in the broader political economy. Even these imperfect measures became a way of thinking about a very messy and ambiguous problem. Were the Street Workers and Program Coordinators doing the right things? How did they know? What is it that they are trying to do? The measures were recognized as limited, but in a very pragmatic way, treated like clues to a larger crossword puzzle that they were trying to figure out together (see Haack 1993).

Certainly, these measures and counts weren't without consequence. In many ways, they became ways for StreetSafe's leadership to communicate more clearly their expectations for the practices of the Street Workers and the Program Coordinators, who in turn began to adjust their practices—for better and worse—at the perception of those expectations.

The second problem faced by practitioners—which is related to the first—has to do with the division of labor surrounding ambiguous and uncertain issues. With many technical problems, there is a natural decomposition of the problem into sub-systems or parts, which can be reflected in an organization's division of labor. As we saw in the problem of “staying in lanes,” there isn't a clear division of labor between Street Work and Service Delivery. In fact, organizationally defined boundaries, such as those that tell Street Workers not to help a young

man find a job because it is someone else's job, not only appear artificial and officious, but at times seem counter to the moral demands of the work. But when helping becomes the work of an organization, it submits to the institutional character of bureaucratized work, which demands some kind of division of labor and the formally rational coordination of those organizational parts. Even if the division of labor seems ill-fitting for the problem at hand, the practical demand of eliciting a consistent, predictable response from a group of individuals working together on the same problem often means that the logic of bureaucratic form wins out over the logic of substance.

If measures got people to think about and adjust their practical activity to be more publicly scrutable (e.g. by making a more active effort to document one's activities), then adoption of more formalized processes made more explicit the expectations and obligations people had to their colleagues. At StreetSafe, the push for more formalized procedures and paperwork centered primarily on the practical demands of the Service Delivery side of the organization. The Program Coordinators wanted consistency from the Street Workers, as well as clarity about their respective roles and obligations. Similarly, the Workforce Development Manager needed clarity about what Street Workers and Program Coordinators needed to do before asking him to help a PRI find a job. In many ways, the paperwork and procedures developed by the Program Coordinators and the Workforce Development manager communicated both their informational needs—that is, what they needed to know about the PRI—as well as their behavioral and attitudinal expectations of the PRIs. In other words, the paperwork and procedures became understood, in part, as a screening process.

While Service Delivery was developing and attempting to enforce these procedures, the message from StreetSafe's leadership, at least at first, was somewhat inconsistent on the matter.

The Executive Director, like many within the organization found the officious “stay in your lanes” mentality anathema to the very spirit of the work. The following exchange from a Community Unit meeting captures this idea nicely:

[The Executive Director] then brought up the idea of “lanes.” He said: “When we talk about lanes, I want you to think about going outside your lane.” He brought up a hypothetical example using one of the PRI’s ID numbers that was on the slide. He said, for example if the Program Coordinator has a relationship with [XX 01], that he should bring that kid into the team and not go off on his own. He emphasized that the team was responsible for the PRIs collectively.

There is an explicit acceptance of the idea that personal influence is central in bringing PRIs into the fold. To let formally defined roles or responsibilities get in the way of that effort is to betray the fundamental purpose of the organization. However, the Executive Director also emphasizes that the members of the Community Unit—Street Workers and PRIs—should be working with the PRIs together. In other words, they needed to work on turning that personal connection into a connection to the PRI shared by the team. Interestingly, the Service Delivery Manager, drawing on literature on practices within social services, had been pushing a similar idea for a while, even before the arrival—namely, the “wraparound model of care.” The basic idea was that every client in the organization would have a small group of adults who would share in the responsibility of helping him or her. The client would have the option of working with whomever they were most comfortable. Of course, there was a bigger, more practical question of how feasible such an amorphous, shared sense of responsibility worked when Street Workers and Program Coordinators had different responsibilities and resources. Still, there was some hope that an informal system, driven by the moral charge that their clients’ “lives were at stake,” could work.

Eventually, the practical need to order and coordinate the actions of StreetSafe’s members won out. Given the population that StreetSafe worked with, there were certain risks that needed to be accounted for by the organization—something learned quickly through trial

and error. For example, typically, Program Coordinators would take a PRI to one of the local career/job centers to sign up, write a résumé, and fill out job applications. However, when some Street Workers went outside their lanes and began taking the PRIs to the job centers themselves, they could inadvertently create a potentially dangerous and explosive situation by bringing PRIs from rival gangs. One of the issues with Boston's gang population is that the gang members from rival gangs seem to have no way of encountering each other in public that does not escalate to violence. Street Workers, acting on StreetSafe's behalf, thus make the organization responsible and potentially liable for even inadvertently creating such an incident. Street Workers are more numerous. Their work is decentralized, mostly out on the streets. Moreover, there is not necessarily a lot of official communication among Street Workers across Community Units. So taking a PRI down to the job center on whim involves considerable risk for the organization. To contain this risk, it just became easier and more practical for the four Program Coordinators to take over this kind of responsibility exclusively. Because they were only four in number, they could more easily communicate with each other and coordinate their schedules to avoid bringing PRIs from rival gangs to a job center, program, and so on. Thus the expectation was that if a PRI wanted to take advantage of such services, the Street Worker would need to go through the Program Coordinator, and that meant filling out the appropriate assessment form and going through the proper protocol for passing the PRI off to the Program Coordinator. The division of labor became more clearly defined and the seemingly artificial demands of formal procedure became part of the expectation of working together.

Similarly, considerations for the organization's reputation and long-term relationships with potential employers led to the reassessment of risk when it came to getting the PRIs jobs. During the first summer under the new Executive Director, some money became available to

support a summer jobs program for StreetSafe. Basically, the money would allow StreetSafe to subsidize the employment of PRIs at local businesses, with the idea that if the PRI did well after the eight week probationary period, the organization might consider taking the PRI on their own payroll. The program had mixed results. While some PRIs did do well and gained long-term employment, others quit or were fired. A few PRIs were even caught stealing from one of businesses. Such embarrassing failures demonstrated the need for a more thorough screening process. Because of experiences such as this, the demands of the Workforce Development Manager to create specific formal criteria for employment (such as being drug free, demonstrating the ability to be punctual, owning appropriate work attire, having a résumé in hand, etc.) were taken seriously and put into place. While there was occasional resistance and noncompliance from the Street Workers and Program Coordinators, in general, the fact that Program Coordinator would screen the PRI and fill out a “work readiness” assessment form before passing the PRI onto the Workforce Development Manager became part of the official expectations for practice.

StreetSafe’s official measures and formalized procedures did not necessary change the basic practical problems Street Workers and Service Delivery faced. Instead, they added a layer of practices—tracking information and actions, filling out paperwork, and going through proper procedure—that made working together easier. Street Workers were still going out on the street and trying to personally engage with PRIs. Program Coordinators were still working with programs and organizations and trying to figure out what the PRIs would want and what would work for them. But they were also gradually incorporating actions and practices that made their existing practices roughly understandable and translatable across contexts. The measures might not reflect the actual work perfectly and the paperwork might not inform a judgment exactly, but

they serve as mutually recognizable objects that facilitate ongoing and consistent practical coordination. While one might not always understand or agree with why a measure is being used or why one must fill out some form, one encounters it as part and parcel of the social facticity of coordination.

A Shared Understanding?

StreetSafe is not without its shared vocabulary. For example, Street Workers and Service Delivery alike recognize the different statuses of PRIs—*Inactive* [not involved with StreetSafe], *Pipeline* [talking to the Street Worker], *Action Ready* [ready for services], and *Engaged* [in a program or employed]. These terms, of course, provide something of a bare bones description of the overall organizational process, but not much else. A shared understanding of just what StreetSafe is up to still eludes the organization as a whole. This is not to say that there haven't been serious attempts. In fact, recently StreetSafe brought in a consultant to help the organization develop a "theory of change." Over several days, a small number of people (from all levels of the organization, as well as a colleague from the evaluation team⁴²) were involved in the process of coming up with StreetSafe's theory of change. And as of the writing of this paper, this theory of change has not been "rolled out" to the rest of the organization. The material developed for the "theory of change" represents sensemaking in a very classic sense, but the fact that it remains uncoupled from StreetSafe's current efforts is revealing. In this section, I want to provide a brief sketch of this sensemaking effort.

⁴² Interestingly, I asked to be a part of these meetings, but was told by members of StreetSafe that they only wanted people who would contribute to development of the theory of change at the meeting. My presence as strictly an observer was seen as potentially disruptive. However, members of the organization have spoken to me about the process and have passed on their notes and the relevant material developed at the meeting to me.

From the beginning of my field work at StreetSafe, I had many conversations with the Service Delivery Manager about the organization's lack of a theory of change. This manager was a big proponent of making the organization's members articulate just what it was that they thought they were up to. She frequently spoke about the organization's need for a "theory of change"—an idea with cachet in the social service sector. StreetSafe's roughly hewn organizational structure and process did not seem to reflect a clear idea about how they could get the PRIs to turn their lives around. Moreover, she saw that Street Workers and Program Coordinators were often working at odds because they had different understandings of just how they should go about changing the PRIs' behavior. She favored a deeper understanding of the process as "changing the mindset" of the PRI rather than merely intervention. For some reason, there seemed to be some reluctance to have this conversation among StreetSafe's leadership. Eventually, almost a year and a half into my fieldwork, StreetSafe brought in a consultant to specifically have this very conversation.

The materials produced suggest a theory of change that is rather inclusive of a variety of existing practices and ideas. Organizational goals were broken down in a variety of ways. There were both individual goals and group [gang] goals. There were also short-term, mid-range, and long-term goals for both individuals and groups. Such broad framing gave room for everything from long-term life goals for the PRIs (such as education, stable employment) to recreational activities run by Street Workers (the value of which some in Service Delivery had questioned before). Connected to these goals were outlining of expectations of practices and responsibilities of both Street Workers and Program Coordinators. Much of the process seemed to be about articulating all of the pieces, and leaving how all of the pieces might fit together "for discussion" among StreetSafe's staff in the future.

This is not to say there wasn't some disagreement or contention surrounding the effort to make sense of StreetSafe's work. In particular, there seemed to be some disagreement about the "ultimate" goal of the organization. On one side, the Impact Associate and the evaluation team leader emphasized that the StreetSafe program was being evaluated on whether or not it reduced gang-related shootings and youth homicides in the Focus Areas. They pointed out that getting a PRI into a program or getting a PRI a job did not necessarily result in that PRI putting down the gun and leaving the gang lifestyle. If the organization's efforts were not resulting in the reduction of violence, then those efforts were potentially wasted. On the other side, the Street Worker and Service Delivery Manager challenged such a stark emphasis on the violence reduction numbers. If the goal was simply to stop the violence, why not just lock all of the PRIs up? Was StreetSafe's job merely to "run the clock out"—that is, keep the PRIs busy with recreation and other such soft incapacitation activities? There was some intimation that such a stark view reflected the fact that the Impact Associate and evaluation team leader were "privileged," white, and not "members of the community." It was dehumanizing to ignore the responsibility to help the PRIs become better, more productive citizens when the organization had the capacity to do so.

Such a contentious moment is revealing both of the moral messiness of the situation, as well as the high stakes of interpreting the work StreetSafe is doing in such a messy moral context. Being stuck in the middle of the two sides—as a white member of the Harvard evaluation team and as someone seen as sympathetic to the problems faced by Service Delivery—I definitely got a clear sense of how emotionally charged the stakes of that conversation were. People were quite upset about it. Framing the problem in different ways does reflect a moral re-imagining of the PRIs, the work StreetSafe is doing, and so on. Is StreetSafe's

job to save the lives of young black men? Is StreetSafe's job to help young black men make better lives for themselves? It is not clear whether these questions are necessarily related or that they are necessarily mutually exclusive. But what one answers means buying into a particular narrative (with all its ontological and causal assumptions) that favors some courses of action over others. The key question then becomes: if the organization commits to a particular narrative, does it potentially marginalize or exclude courses of action that might, in some vague sense, be helpful for solving this *set* of messy moral problems.

All of this is to say, does it make sense for StreetSafe to engage in too much sensemaking? Can the organization work if it commits to some strong narrative about what it is up to? It is not too much of a stretch to argue that StreetSafe is working as an organization without that shared understanding of what the organization is up to. Are the emotional and practical stakes tied up into the decidedly moralized narratives available to the organization too high to risk in trying to come to some deeper understanding of the work? In other words, might sensemaking undermine rather than facilitate the coordination of action?

Discussion

StreetSafe Boston, as an experimental pilot program, has set out to accomplish a tremendous task—reducing entrenched neighborhood gang violence in a real and consequential way through persuasion and the promise of opportunity. Whether it succeeds or not has yet to be determined. But what we have learned from StreetSafe's struggle so far is that organization and thinking about the problem necessarily go hand-in-hand, but not as traditionally been imagined.

Inner-city gang violence is not *a* problem, but rather a complex set of problems. Poverty, persistent drug markets, generations of racial and socioeconomic inequality, the powerful

seduction of a glorified criminal lifestyle, mental health issues, drug addiction, the dissolution of the traditional family, underperforming public schools, the disappearance of stable working class jobs, over-reliance on an entrenched social service bureaucracy, traditions of neighborhood territorialism and retaliatory violence—the list could go on. To dare to take action against inner-city gang violence means that one has to begin somewhere. Whatever solution one imagines and acts upon necessarily imposes a limited vision of the problem, based on similarly limited and flawed assumptions.

To take a course of action means not taking other possible courses. What one knows and what one can learn about the problem is bound to that course of action. The world responds, sometimes in line with one's expectation, but most often in unexpected and in unclear ways. The question then becomes: when facing such a messy complex problem, how much sense of the problem does one need to have in order to justify continuing on some course of action, abandoning other courses of action, or perhaps taking another course altogether?

Imagined from the point of view of the individual, such a pragmatic view of action, inquiry, and deliberation is a relatively simple and straightforward process. More often than not, the way we respond to such complex problems is through bureaucratic organizations. As such, the demands of bureaucratic organization necessarily seep into the collective capacity to act, inquire, and deliberate. StreetSafe began not just with assumptions about the problems it was tackling, but assumptions about how the division of labor would work in the face of such problems. Members of the organization went out into the world with some notion of what they were to do and how they were to go about working with each other. The demands of actual practice pushed back against these assumptions about not only what it would take to work with this proven-risk population, but also how the organization's member could work effectively

together in a consistent manner. Organizations, if the experience of StreetSafe reveals anything, are better equipped to facilitate the coordination of its members, even without necessarily resolving the substance of the problem at hand.

People can work together, relatively effectively and consistently, as long as they understand their obligations in key points of interaction and coordination with others. The formal features of the organization, encountered as reified social facts, reinforce the necessary constraints of a surface agreement at these points of coordination. While we might disagree vehemently in our interpretation of some problem, we know the issue needs to be resolved by the end of this meeting; we know that the other person only needs a few pieces of information from us, so we cooperate and keep our mouth shut about the rest; we might be angry or upset, but we put that aside so we can all move on and get things done. Paperwork, rules, and procedures do not necessarily suffocate the richness of individual knowledge and interpretation within an organization, but make it manageable and workable.

Such an interpretation might come across as cynical, but that is not my intention. In fact, I want to suggest that we approach such features of organizational life with measured ambivalence. In the worst case scenario, the formal features of an organization sustain surface agreements that prevent some key facts, pieces of information, or interpretations from changing the organization's course of action, driving the organization to disaster. This is a real and important concern—one that has drawn much needed attention over the years.

Let us consider this issue from another perspective. What happens when you are dealing with a problem where it is not necessarily clear what the right thing to do is? What happens when clear and consistent evidence of success or failure is hard to come by? What if we don't know if what we are doing is exactly right, but we know that something needs to be done? If we can't

truly settle on what exactly we are doing, isn't it useful to be able to sustain the collective effort of a large number of individuals without those clear, compelling pieces of evidence? Might those surface agreements that sustain coordination, despite potentially profound differences, allow such an organization to perhaps eventually discover, in its various courses of action, some glimmer of truth about its efforts?

The formal features of an organization facilitate coordination, potentially at the cost of the truth. To claim that this may be a good thing on some occasions is not devalue the truth, but to concede that we live in a world where we encounter some problems where clarity and certainty elude us—where we might not apprehend truth so easily. In the absence of clear or certain evidence, we may be taking the wrong course of action and not know it. We may also be taking the right course of action and not know it. The capacity to coordinate our actions with others without a fully articulated or fully shared vision of the collective problem allows us to sustain potentially useful—and potentially dangerous—fictions. The rise and predominance of the bureaucratic organization of the handling of almost all human problems speaks to this power.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the case of the emerging organization of the pilot gang-intervention program, StreetSafe Boston. I first outlined three interrelated barriers StreetSafe faced in effectively coordinating its members during its early years: practical, conceptual, and emotional. StreetSafe effectively faced a problem organizing—how was it going to get a sustained and consistent effort from its members when they were having a hard time working together for a variety of reasons? Next, I explored the theoretical issues related to the problems faced by StreetSafe. I pointed out that in many ways, StreetSafe's experience fit well with

Weick's understanding of organizational action that informs his concept of sensemaking. However, I argue that Weick's concept of sensemaking overlooks people's capacity to coordinate their actions without a shared understanding of the problem at hand. Drawing on work critical of this idea, as well as Goffman's notion of surface agreement, I argue that the constraint of mutual relevance sustains coordination without the need for deep semantic engagement. Moreover, I argue that the formal features of organizations are particularly good at reinforcing these kinds of surface agreements.

I then attempt to detail how StreetSafe actually began to organize. The top-down exercise of authority to change the tone of the organization's culture and to formalize roles and procedures resulted in bottom-up practices oriented toward more effective and consistent coordination. Moreover, explicit attempts to engage in a deeper kind of sensemaking about what the organization was up to clearly took a backseat to the emotional and practical coordination that was working. I have tried to argue that the formal features of organizations generally do a better job facilitating coordination than resolving substantive issues. This is both a powerful and worrisome feature of organizational life that had profound implications for our ability to work on problems of any significance.

Conclusion

Two key themes undergird all three of the case studies in this dissertation. The first theme has to do with the nature of the problems that all three organizations face. The world at the crossroads of social services and criminal justice is fraught with moral ambiguity and practical uncertainty. For many individual cases, it is not at all clear what the right thing to do is. Moreover, when trying to get people to change their behavior, there are no guarantees that even the best possible course of action will work out in the end. Such epistemic conditions place strain on both the processes of interpretation and coordination. Complex and ambiguous cases invite multiple interpretations from very different perspectives. The tenuous relationship between actions and clear results makes evaluating the effectiveness of any course of action extremely difficult. The world at the crossroads of social services and criminal justice is one where multiple interpretations hang together loosely, where various claims about the nature of the problem and its solution are made but never fully substantiated, where a sense of what works comes slowly and partially obscured.

Such ambiguous epistemic conditions do not, however, undermine the fact that nature of the problem—whether we think of these young criminals as victims of poverty, neglect, and trauma or as growing threats to their communities or both—provides a moral imperative to *do something*. This brings us to the second, related theme. Things work in all three of these organizations despite the fact that there are often profound disagreements and contradictions about the problem and its solution among the organizations' members. People recognize these differences, often in very critical ways, but still manage to work together. This capacity to put aside differences to coordinate actions toward some common, if vague and elusive, goal, allows these loosely coupled organizations to hold together.

These two themes taken together suggest a slight variation on the Pragmatist theory of action/mind underlying Peirce's foundational doubt-belief theory of inquiry. In Peirce's proposed model, we are constantly acting in the world with a wide set of beliefs—often implicit, unexpressed assumptions—about how things work. It is only when something out there in the world disrupts our habitual course of action that we begin to doubt our beliefs about some aspect of the world. We then deliberate and experiment with new ideas about this aspect of the world, looking for a new course of action that works. In this Pragmatist model, the truth of a belief is its “cash value” in action—that is, it works. While I am deeply sympathetic to this understanding, I also want to point out that this is an individual model of adaptive intelligence. It is from the perspective of what works for the individual acting directly in the world. One gets the image of a solitary hunter adapting intelligently to the jungle around him. While this is an important aspect of the human mind, it misses that most *human* aspect of our minds—namely, its deeply social nature.

When we move from a situation in which the individual is acting in the world unmediated by the social experience of others to a situation in which the individual must take into account the actions and expectations of others, then we fundamentally change that which constitutes what it means for a course of action to work. The issue is no longer just about how the world out there responds to one's actions, but how other people respond to one's actions (and all the beliefs explicitly or implicitly attached to such actions). Some individual course of action may be appropriate for the problem at hand, but it may not work from the perspective of coordinating one's actions and efforts with others. Conversely, an individual course of action may align well with the expectations of others, providing important social feedback that such an action works, when, from the perspective of the problem itself, such a course of action is

ineffective. This is not to say that collective beliefs are necessarily decoupled from substance of the problems at hand, but rather that the individual experiences the actions, beliefs, and expectations of others as having a force all their own. An individual's sense of what works may come from his or her direct, private experience of the world, some combination of direct experience of the world and social experience, as well as social experience by itself.

Human minds are not just adapted for individual-level problem-solving. In fact, a growing body of evidence suggests that what gives the human mind both its distinctive capacities and predictable flaws is its uniquely social orientation. We are attuned to one another, consciously and unconsciously. Our capacities for communication, empathy, language, morality, synchronization, cooperation, categorization, story-telling, and so on all point to minds formed by the demands of social coordination. This is why I have proposed a more expansive view of human cognition and knowledge that takes into account the wider array of conscious and unconscious kinds of data and information our minds process. We are clearly capable of creating elaborate conceptual worlds that constitute much of our capacity to represent and communicate about the world to ourselves and each other. But our minds are also embodied in the visceral experiences of practical activity and emotions that make up so much of our day-to-day lives. Moreover, our concepts, practices, and emotions are all connected to our capacity for coordinating with others. Our minds are engaged with one another along multiple dimensions; our seemingly individual capacities for acting in and making sense of the world are biased to the demands of social life.

With this more expansive model of cognition and knowledge in mind, it is easier to make sense of what is going on in organizations like Berkshire Farm, the Department of Juvenile Justice, or StreetSafe. If we think that collective action hinges on some shared conceptual

understanding of the problem at hand, then we have a very difficult time explaining what goes on in most organizations. The practical need for a variety of specialized understandings of some problem would be in constant tension with this supposed need for consensus. By insisting that people are quite capable of working together without that shared understanding, we decouple the problem of interpretation from the problem of coordination. The co-presence differing, even contradictory, interpretations in a given situation does not *necessarily* undermine collective action. What matters is how individuals make the social processes of coordination—those moments of communication and interaction—work.

This is why Goffman's notion of surface agreement, while deceptively simple, is especially insightful into the relationship between individual meaning and collective action. Most successful social interactions depend on our capacity to leave aside private concerns, feelings, problems, and thoughts. While different interactional contexts have different norms about content, tone, topic, style, and so forth, all interactions depend on our capacity for inference and ability to establish mutual relevance. The very physical nature of our metaphors for such successful interactions is revealing: we read each other; we align ourselves; we are attuned with one another; we are in synch. This is embodied practical and emotional work. It does not occur solely in the realm of words and concepts (though they do play an important role). As social beings, we learn that acting as part of the group requires an effort that is distinct from our own private experiences and wants—the central point of Durkheim's claims about the dual nature of man. Social interactions depend on the joint production of a very thin sense of what is at stake for the group, which may have only the most tenuous relationship with the private meanings of the interactions participants.

Of course, such ideas have a broad application across a variety of social situations, but this notion of surface agreement seems especially of interest in formalized social contexts. Whether we are talking about rituals or some formal organizational procedure, such structured social processes act as reinforced surface agreements that participants encounter as something external to their own private thinking. This is not to say the participants do not necessarily believe in the official meaning of the ritual or the purpose of the procedure (they may, in fact, wholeheartedly do so), but rather that the social force of such structured processes renders the problem of private interpretation (one way or another) largely irrelevant. Such formalized social processes prescribe actions, words, and even emotions that are deemed relevant to the group. Deviations, disruptions, improvisations, and violations may occur, but structure of the process, as something recognized as relevant to the group's actions, still holds, allowing coordination to take place, moving collective action forward without the need for a one-to-one correspondence among the individual minds participating in the collective action.

The strength of formal bureaucratic organizations comes as much from the fact that they leverage the social orientation of our minds—along multiple dimensions—as much as it does any technical leverage over any problem out in the world. Imagine some large-scale, complex technical task, like launching a spacecraft or running nuclear power plant, that, while certainly beyond the scope of any one individual's efforts and understanding, can be broken down into constituent components. The handling of the components can more or less be reflected in a division of labor that coordinates in a way that makes technical sense for the task at hand. We might assume (mistakenly, I believe) that issues of interpretation are minimal in such an organization, as all the parts fit together and work together in a way that directly reflects the nature of the problem. When something out there in the world goes wrong, some specialist picks

up on the feedback and the organization, as a finely tuned machine, responds as whole in a timely and appropriate manner. Such a description certainly seems appropriate for spacecraft and nuclear power plants, as they operate safely without major problems most of the time—until they don't. It is easy to confuse the problem of interpretation with the problem of coordination when the former appears to map on the latter so well. It is only in the face of disaster that we look back and see the gap between issues of interpretation and issues of coordination going on in such organizations. More often than not in such scenarios, the problem is not that no one came up with the correct interpretation of the problem that could have prevented the disaster, but that the demands of coordination—the need to get along, to make it work—often overwhelm such individual interpretations.

Surface agreements, reinforced by the formal features of organizational life, necessarily narrow what constitutes the mutually relevant information that drives collective action. In some cases, this is deeply problematic, as the literature on organizational disasters reveals. However, these surface agreements also help organizations like Berkshire Farm, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and StreetSafe *work* despite highly ambiguous and uncertain epistemic conditions that they face. The nature of the problem creates a moral imperative to do *something*, but we are not afforded the luxury of knowing with great certainty what the best thing to do is with many of the young men involved in social service organizations and the juvenile justice system.

We might look at organizations like Berkshire Farm, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and StreetSafe as throwing a bunch of different solutions at the problem and seeing what sticks. This is not necessarily intended as a criticism. Consider the alternative. Could the DJJ's sentencing process work as technical calculation, where sentence points are handed out along the

multiple dimensions under consideration—education, family history, crimes, cooperativeness, therapeutic needs, etc? One may certainly imagine this happening, but would it necessarily produce any more meaningful results than the current, largely ritualized sentencing process? No, the substance of the problem resists scrutiny beyond a certain point. No amount of quantification or rationalization of the problem will change that. A loosely coupled system of varying perspectives, with hope, makes the organization more responsive to the varied, amorphous, and ambiguous set of problems that they must deal with. The fact that the DJJ could get professionals with varying perspectives to sit down in a room together and look past their potential differences and contradictions in understanding speaks volumes to the power of such formal processes. These formal features steel the surface agreements that hold such a loosely coupled system together. People can work together as if there are no substantive differences in their respective understandings of the problem and its solution.

In looking at all three case studies, we can see how different kinds of surface agreements, sustained and reinforced by the formal features of the organization, hold the loosely coupled organizations together. First and foremost, surface agreements sustained by sets of practices are the most obvious in all three cases. At Berkshire Farm, child care workers and teachers make adjustments in their practices to meet the demands of the new psychotherapeutically informed behavioral management system, but they don't necessarily buy into its understanding of the problems that they are dealing with. At DJJ, the sentencing process is primarily about getting the process done. And at StreetSafe, the Street Workers and the Program Coordinators had to stop doing each other's jobs and comply with formal procedures and information-tracking protocol. Coordination in terms of practice depends on some surface agreement about the mutual recognition what it is that each actor is doing. At the most basic level, this is about assuring the

predictable activity necessary for coordination. Much of formal organizational authority would seem to stem not necessarily from being able to determine how people interpret the situation that they face, but being able to determine their practical obligations to one another. In this sense, within the context of formal organization, coordination in terms of practices is probably the most widespread and easiest to institute.

In turning to emotions, one gets some sense that they matter, but perhaps in less obvious ways. Coordination in terms of emotions is possible when people work to sustain, in some sense, the surface agreement of emotional tone. In the DJJ sentencing process, the professionals actively maintain the group's emotional tone together, as it is those outside the routine's regular participants—the boys, their attorneys, and their parents—who often prove disruptive to the process. This tone may vary from chastising to encouraging, sympathetic to skeptical, but what is key is that it is, in some sense, publicly shared. At StreetSafe, an antagonistic emotional tone among some individuals almost undermined the organization's ability to work. While some changes in personnel and directives to professionalize interactions played a key role in proscribing some kinds of emotional outbursts, in a more positive sense, the idea that Street Workers and Program Coordinators were in it together “to save lives” helped create a shared sense of significance of their collective efforts. Typically, bureaucratic organizations do a lot of work to professionalize their members to minimize potentially disruptive personal emotions, but this kind of effort is an attempt to regulate the collective experience of emotions. Various clichéd “team-building” exercises are often about changing the emotional tenor of a group in one situation with the hope of that collective sentiment carrying over into work. In some lines of work, such as social services, religious or community services, and education (and other “thankless” professions), building and sustaining collective effervescence often plays a key role

in dealing with the lack of feedback about the quality and worth of one's efforts. Much of the coordination in terms of emotions appears to center on the recognition of dignity and worth. For individual members who feel slighted (or who fail to recognize the dignity of others), any slight difference in interpretation can be cause for conflict. Conversely, for individual members who feel satisfied as a respected member of the group, substantive differences, or even substantive problems with other members, often get minimized or ignored altogether.

Thinking about coordination in terms of conceptual understanding presents something of a trickier problem theoretically. Within organizational studies, the idea that organizational members must, at some level, have a shared conceptual understanding of the problem at hand in order to coordinate their actions underlies the interpretive work in both the traditions on organizational culture (Martin 2002) as well as the more recent work on institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). Work in these areas often emphasizes the efforts organizations make to ensure some kind of interpretive consensus among their members. In this view, differences in conceptual understandings or logics are not necessarily bad—in fact, recent work (e.g. Stark 2009) has emphasized the role such differences play in innovation and creativity—but they are almost always potentially disruptive to the processes of coordination. I would suggest that we call this view the deep consensus model of conceptual coordination. In such a view, actors draw on the same array of concepts, logics, symbols, and understandings in order to establish a shared sense of the problem at hand. Such a view conflates the processes of interpretation and coordination. The work done to establish a shared understanding paves the way for effective and legitimate collective action.

My goal is not to deny that, at times, a deeply shared conceptual understanding drives coordination, but rather to loosen up such a restrictive understanding of the interpretive

conditions necessary for coordination to take place. If all three of my case studies suggest anything, it is that coordination in terms of a shared conceptual understanding is perhaps the most difficult to build and sustain. When the problem at hand is particularly difficult, if not impossible, to resolve, attempts to engage the substantive differences in understanding may prove especially disruptive to the organization's functioning.

This is where we might begin to think of interpretive or conceptual work as also happening at the level of surface agreement rather than just at the level of deep consensus. A surface agreement understanding of conceptual coordination is more consistent with an inferential model of communication (Sperber and Wilson 1995) and the insights of ethnomethodology. Communication is not about transmitting knowledge from one mind to another. Instead, it is about establishing a sense of mutual relevance in the face of an infinitely rich shared cognitive environment. To do this, we rely heavily on each other's inferential abilities. We often communicate surprisingly little information to get the gist of each other's intentions well enough to make the interaction work.

In the case of people who may have vastly different understandings of some shared endeavor, conceptual or verbal surface agreements make coordination possible by leveraging this ability to leave much unsaid. In this sense, one of the greatest strengths of formal bureaucratic organizations is their seemingly endless well of jargon, verbal gymnastics, euphemisms, and doublespeak. While it is easy to criticize the vagueness and forced neutrality of organizational specific terminology and neologisms as being frivolous, if not outright "bullshit," such ambiguous verbal games play an important role in sustaining a neutral middle ground among competing interpretations. For example, StreetSafe refers to the gang members (or more accurately, "group" members) as "Proven Risk Individuals" or PRIs rather than gang members,

clients, at-risk youth, thugs, troubled youth, criminals, and so on. These other interpretations of these individuals do not go away, but such official terminology sends signals to a variety of audiences that the collective representation of these individuals will be handled in a particular way. “PRI” becomes a part of the shared public vocabulary of different parts of the organization, which establishes a minimal sense of mutual relevance necessary for coordination and collective action to take place. Official terminology becomes tied to official courses of action, muting but not eliminating other interpretive differences. We see the same kind of pattern with official forms, standards, and measures. These are shared conceptual tools that facilitate coordination by a kind of official verbal and conceptual narrowing of what is relevant from one part of an organization to the others. Such simplifications necessarily belie the complexity and nuances individuals experience on the ground for the sake of getting people to work together.

It could be argued that such conceptual or verbal surface agreements are probably the most fragile. They are certainly the easiest to manipulate, sincerely or cynically. Changing official terminology is certainly low cost, but as a form of coordination it is probably the most difficult to maintain on its own. We can imagine a group holding together as the result of intertwined practical activities. We can even imagine emotional bonds sustaining a group over the long run. However, shallow conceptual surface agreements always run the risk of being unable to cover the complexity of the polysemous objects that organizations deal with. At Berkshire Farm, long-time teachers and child care workers expressed skepticism of the administration’s new behavioral management system because they had already been through several changes in this verbal/conceptual window-dressing of their day-to-day practices. While they may have gone along with some of the official changes, they also knew that such changes in terminology did not necessarily mean that they were going to change what had worked for them

for so long. The complex and unfolding demands of practice have a way of poking through such official conceptual artifices. Without the reinforcement of effective practical or emotional coordination, such conceptual surface agreements, so easily built, may just as easily tear.

Within the context of organizational life, all three kinds of surface agreements are built on a combination of routines and boundary objects. This includes formal processes, procedures, and protocol, as well as paperwork, forms, official categories, standards, measures, and technologies. In important ways, these processes and objects reinforce the social facticity of the surface agreements. Individuals experience them as external to his or her own private thoughts and interpretations, as something belonging to the group; moreover, these routines and boundary objects carry a normative weight about how things need to be done. These routines and boundary objects exist out there in the world. Working with these things is part and parcel of coordinating with one another.

In placing so much emphasis on the problem of coordination, I hope to get us to rethink the problem of interpretation within the context of organizations. One of the central claims of the literature on organizational cognition is that organizations have mind of their own. My intention is to steer us away from thinking about organizational cognition as an additive or agglutinative process where various individual efforts and interpretations are pieced together. Instead, I want to suggest that the demands of coordination necessarily transform the collective nature of individual actions and interpretations. Thinking about the problem—in the broad sense, conceptually, practically, and emotionally—gets tied up with thinking about getting along and working with others. Is it practically possible for the visions of therapy and control to be simultaneously fully realized in every situation at Berkshire Farm? Is it possible for a sentence to follow all of the various logics expressed at the DJJ at the same time? Is it possible for StreetSafe

to realize both the short-term concerns of the Street Workers and long-term vision of Service Delivery? No, these differing substantive visions of the problem cannot be simultaneously realized without profound contradictions. Yet, these different visions hold together, loosely, through the organizations' ability ensure coordination of their members without a shared understanding of the problems at hand. The organizations, faced with complex, impossible tasks, need to think about the problem in different ways. Their legitimacy within the wider world depends on it.

There is larger, philosophical point here. How do we imagine the relationship between the human mind and the wider world? Do we think of the world as ultimately knowable and understandable? Do we think that with the right information and the right theory that the limits of human knowledge know no bounds? Or do we imagine a world filled with complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty that is beyond the pale of human thinking? Are there inherent limits in our ability to know, understand, predict, and act in this world? Looking at organizations at the crossroads of social services and the criminal justice system has certainly made me more appreciative of the complexity of the world and the limits of human understanding. If one begins from the point of the view that there is some clear, certain, knowable truth about the cases faced at places like Berkshire Farm, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and StreetSafe, then one might look at the organizations' capacity to act without a deep substantive agreement about the problem and its solution with a degree of horror. If one accepts limits to our understanding and some degree of moral ambiguity, then we can appreciate the accomplishment that it is to *do something* in the face of such ambiguity and uncertainty.

This capacity for coordination without a clear interpretation—this ability to derive our sense that something is *working* because it works in a social sense—is a double-edged sword.

Organizations can compel collective action forward, even without clear evidence or clear goals in view. Organizations can help coordinate our efforts, even if we don't fully understand the nature of the problem or its solution. Surface agreements sustain collective action, but always at the potential cost that some individual interpretation, some piece of information picked up by someone in the group, that is key to the whole collective effort, might go unrecognized due to the demands of coordination. Formal bureaucratic organizations are the primary way we deal with problems and issues of any consequence in almost every aspect of human existence because of their capacity to build and sustain collective effort despite differences in understanding.

In this dissertation, I have tried to present a new way to understand organizational cognition and the problems of interpretation and coordination inherent to organizational life. In Chapter One, I explored the problems in the existing literature in both the information-processing and interpretive views of organizational cognition. I then build an alternative multi-dimensional model of cognition and knowledge that attempts to synthesize insights from a wide array of research traditions on the problems of knowledge and cognition. This model of cognition, which includes interconnected conceptual, practical, emotional, and coordinating dimensions, allows us to better account for the ways in which people are able to coordinate without a deep consensus about the interpretation of the problem at hand. In the next three substantive chapters, I attempt to explore the key themes and problems at the heart of my proposed model.

In Chapter Two, I detailed the case of the Berkshire Farm juvenile treatment center, an organization seemingly torn by the competing logics of therapy and control. I tried to use this case as a way to more thoroughly examine not only the role of the practical dimensions of knowledge, but also the nature of organizational authority in shaping practical coordination. Looking at Berkshire Farm's history, one can see the clear development of the therapeutic

interpretation of juvenile delinquency as occurring among a group of professionals purposefully kept distinct from the practical concerns of control. Importantly, while this therapeutic view of the problem eventually becomes the official view of Berkshire Farm's administration, the control-oriented view of the childcare workers and teachers, which often runs counter to the therapeutic ethos, still persists. I argue that these two distinct communities of practice operate in different spheres of pragmatic authority. Their respective interpretations of the problem are rooted in their day-to-day experiences and concerns, so the therapeutic ethos espoused by the administration and clinical staff will never fully apply to the concerns of the direct care staff. What the administration and clinical staff do have is organizational authority, which allows them to set the formal standards, procedures, and official forms that become part of the direct care staff's practices. Formal organizational authority in this sense comes from being able to determine what others can do, but not necessarily what they believe or how they must interpret the practical demands of their work.

In Chapter Three, I examined the sentencing process at the Department of Juvenile Justice. During this process, a group of professionals gather around a table to report various kinds of information about the adjudicated delinquent—his crimes, his family situation, his educational needs, his substance abuse history, his therapeutic needs, his gang involvement, and so on—for the purpose of determining his sentence and placement. One might expect that in such an intimate interactional setting, resolving differences in interpretation might be important. Instead, what we find is that sentences, which are largely predetermined by state sentencing rules, are justified according to multiple, even contradictory logics without any explicit attempt to resolve such substantive differences. I argue that the formal, ritualized nature of the process itself sustains a kind of surface agreement among the professionals that allows them to act as if

there are no contradictions among their various interpretations. Being able to justify a sentence according to multiple logics is not only possible, but preferable as it makes any one decision defensible against a wider array of potential claims.

In Chapter Four, I explored the case of StreetSafe Boston, the pilot gang intervention program. In its early days, StreetSafe faced a variety of barriers—practical, conceptual, and emotional—that prevented its Street Workers and Service Delivery staff from coordinating their efforts effectively. While StreetSafe would seem to be an organization with a need to engage in sensemaking—either from the ground-up or imposed from the top-down—this is not exactly what happened. Instead, it was a combination of top-down imposed formal features—standards/measures, procedures, and forms—and the bottom-up practical adjustment in relation to those formalized expectations that allowed the Street Workers and Service Delivery team to put aside whatever emotional and conceptual differences that they might have and begin to coordinate in terms of practice. This ability to work together without a clear sense or understanding of just what the problem or its solution is essentially allows the organization, as a whole, to actively and pragmatically engage with the problem.

Taken altogether, these three case studies present the portrait of both an admirable group of professionals and a troubling sense of the moral and practical dilemmas that they encounter in their work. More often than not, a strong moral sense compels them into such work that can be heartbreaking and frustrating. They may be helping these young men escape and recover their neglectful and abusive homes. They may be helping a mentally ill young man deal with the turmoil of his own mind. They may be helping a budding young criminal realize the destruction he has wrought on his own community and turn his life around. Yet these professionals cannot do this work alone. The problem is too big and too complicated for any one individual. To get at

this problem, organizations are necessary. This thoroughly bureaucratized line of work develops characteristics distinct from the nature of the problem. The paperwork, the formal procedures, the rules, the standards, the measures, the due process, and the protocol become part and parcel of the job. However flawed these bureaucratic annoyances may be, they help sustain the on-going need to coordinate the efforts of all involved, making it work.

APPENDIX

TABLE 2.1 (Sorted by Order of Observation)							
Case #	Safety	Treatment	Responsibility	Cooperation	Educational	Legal/ Bureaucratic	Total
1			X	X	X	X	4
2	X	X	X	X	X		5
3		X	X	X	X	X	5
4	X	X	X	X	X		5
5	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
6	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
7	X	X	X		X	X	5
8	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
9	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
10	X	X	X	X	X		5
11	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
12	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
13	X	X	X	X	X		5
14	X	X	X	X	X		5
15	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
16		X	X	X	X	X	5
17		X	X	X	X		4
18	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
19	X	X	X		X	X	5
20	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
21	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
22	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
23	X	X	X	X	X		5
24		X	X	X	X	X	5
25	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
26		X	X	X	X		4
27	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
28		X	X	X	X	X	5
29		X	X	X	X	X	5
30	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
31	X	X		X	X	X	5
32	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
33	X	X	X	X	X		5
TOTAL	25	32	32	31	33	24	

Table 2.2 (Sorted by Total Number of Categories)

Case #	Safety	Treatment	Responsibility	Cooperation	Educational	Legal/ Bureaucratic	Total
1			X	X	X	X	4
26		X	X	X	X		4
7	X	X	X		X	X	5
19	X	X	X		X	X	5
31	X	X		X	X	X	5
2	X	X	X	X	X		5
4	X	X	X	X	X		5
10	X	X	X	X	X		5
13	X	X	X	X	X		5
14	X	X	X	X	X		5
23	X	X	X	X	X		5
33	X	X	X	X	X		5
3		X	X	X	X	X	5
16		X	X	X	X	X	5
17		X	X	X	X	X	5
24		X	X	X	X	X	5
28		X	X	X	X	X	5
29		X	X	X	X	X	5
5	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
6	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
8	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
9	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
11	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
12	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
15	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
18	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
20	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
21	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
22	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
25	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
27	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
30	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
32	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
TOTAL	25	32	32	31	33	25	

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